

## **The Politics of Eco-violence: Why is Conflict Escalating in Nigeria's Middle Belt?**

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### **Abstract**

Competition for natural resources has intensified in recent years between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in Nigeria's Middle Belt. What were initially sporadic conflicts over cropland and water resources have transformed into daily occurrences of mass violence. While extant research centres on the root causes of such conflicts, the reasons for their escalation remain insufficiently understood. This article examines how political developments have contributed to the escalation of conflicts in the region. Using Homer-Dixon's model, the findings show that changes in Nigeria's 'political opportunity structure' since 2014 were catalysts for escalating the conflicts. The consequences were the unvarnished adoption of nepotistic domestic policies and alliances between elites and militia members, which escalated the violent conflicts. It advocates the devolution of natural resource and security governance to prevent leaders from leveraging shifts in political opportunity structures to favour a specific demographic group.

*Keyword: Farmer-herder conflicts, Middle Belt, Political Opportunity Structure, Nigeria, Eco-violence.*

## Introduction

On April 27, 2021, when gunmen attacked and killed seven people at an IDP camp in Benue State, Mr Samuel Ortom, Governor of Benue State, reacted by accusing Nigeria's president of being a sectional president of the Fulani people(1). The President responded that the killings and violence in Benue State resulted from Mr. Ortom's refusal to adopt 'RUGA policy'<sup>1</sup> and urged him to adopt it for the sake of peace (2). A few days later, as if exonerated by the President's comments, Fulani gunmen attacked a Tiv community in Benue State, killing eleven people and displacing hundreds more (3). These mass killings and destructions are distinct from Boko Haram terrorist attacks, and according to some accounts, they are even more lethal<sup>2</sup> (4,5).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, civilians have outnumbered armed combatants as conflict victims (6), a trend that is reflected in the significant rise in the frequency of non-state conflicts globally (7). Indeed, there are no specific battlefields in these 'new wars' (8), but rather a spread of violence by non-state actors dispersed across the entire population of the targeted groups (6,9). The competition over water and fertile land has caused intractable conflicts between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, particularly since the droughts of 1972-1973 and 1983-1986 (10–13). These conflicts can be characterised as 'eco-violence', or violent conflicts between two or more groups, predominantly but not solely non-state actors, for access to and control of limited natural resources such as water and fertile land (14,15).

The severity of eco-violence in recent years in Nigeria is unprecedented and has left thousands of people killed and properties worth millions of dollars destroyed (10,16). The Middle Belt is the most affected regions by eco-violence (17,18 See figure 1). The Middle Belt has an estimated population of over 30 million people<sup>3</sup>, inhabited mainly by people from the Tivs, Idomas, Berom, Jukuns, Mambila ethnic groups, who are primarily sedentary farmers (19,20). As of 2014, approximately 11,700 people were killed in eco-violence related conflicts in Benue State (21). According to a 2021 study, 309,231 individuals were displaced in the Middle Belt, with 204,193 displaced due to communal violence in Benue State alone, making it the state with the most significant number of internally displaced persons in Nigeria (22).

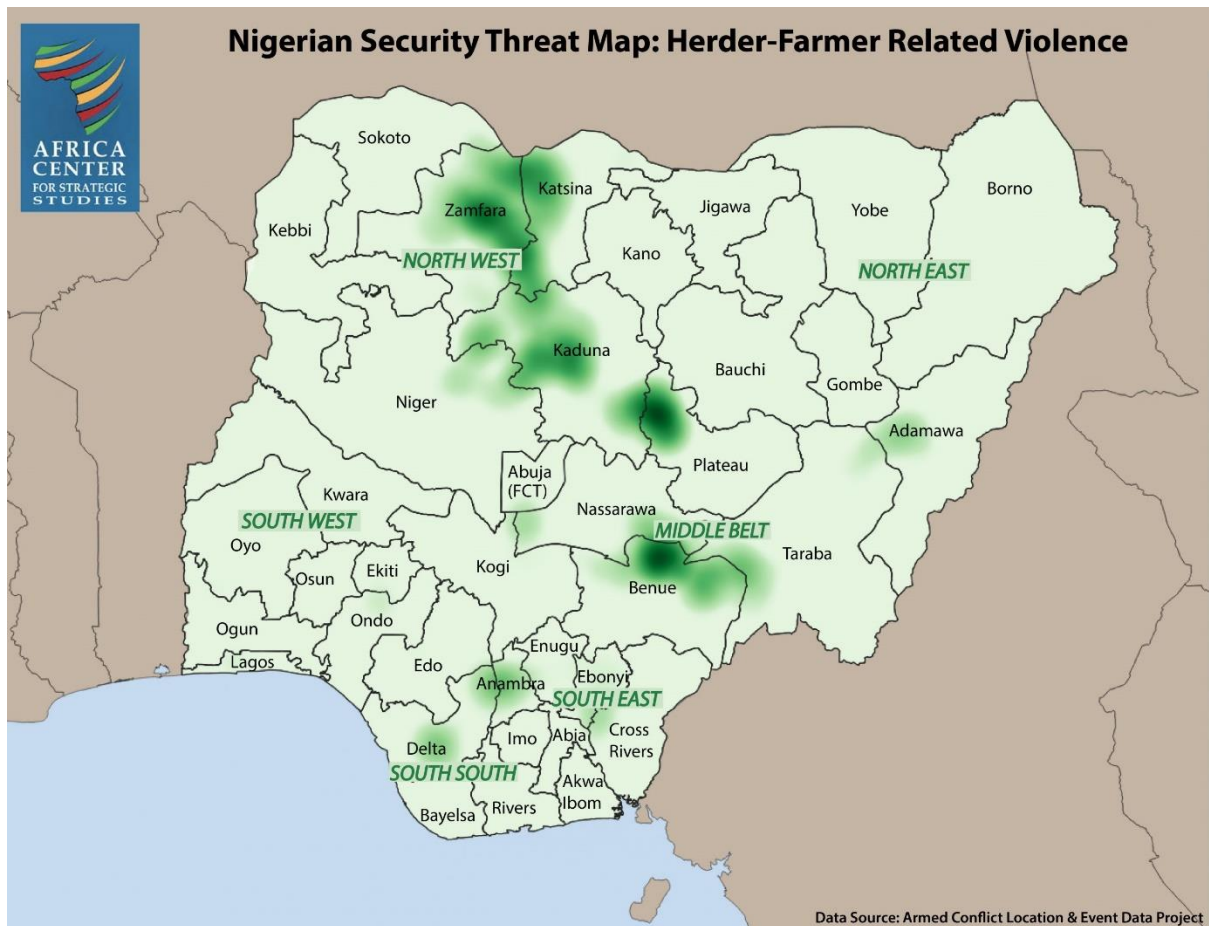


Figure 1. Source: (23)

The significant debates on eco-violence have typically focused on how adverse climatic conditions have created scarcity and unfavourable living conditions for herders, necessitating their migration into farming communities already constrained, resulting in conflict (24,25). Others argue that it is not scarcity but abundance and economic opportunities that create the conditions for these conflicts to erupt (12,26). Structural factors like land-use systems and contradictory regulatory frameworks have been identified as factors responsible for these conflicts (21,27,28). These issues have been exacerbated by ethnicity and exclusionary practices (29). The emergence of 'ungoverned spaces' are also fuelling these conflicts (30,31). Corruption related to the vested interests of agro investors and elites has emerged as additional critical factors in the recent upsurge of eco-violence (10,32); and likewise, the framing, construction, and representation of people's lives and the conflicts over water and grazing fields (28,33).

This article departs from those approaches to investigate how political developments in Nigeria's Middle Belt since 2014 have contributed to the escalation of eco-violence. Since 2014, these conflicts have morphed from sporadic flare-ups into almost daily occurrences of

mass violence (34,35). The article focuses on conflicts between Tiv farming communities and Fulani herders in the Middle Belt, drawing on secondary sources.

By adopting conceptual insights from Homer-Dixon's interpretations of the theories of civil strife, which states that groups of actors will resort to eco-violence to address grievances when faced with increases in deprivation and favourable political opportunities (14), and adapting it with the concept of *political opportunity structure*; this paper seeks to understand why the conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt is escalating? It argues that the changes in the *political opportunity structure* in Nigeria since 2014, exemplified by the emergence of a new breed of government officials and pronounced collaborations between the elites and militias, have resulted in nepotistic domestic policies and impunity for violent militia groups. The *political opportunity structure* describes characteristics of a regime or government that provides opportunities and impediments to system actors, and a change in those features alters who receives favours or is constrained (36).

The article argues that these changes favoured the Fulani herders, who saw it as an opportunity to redress their grievances against the farming communities in the Middle Belt. Such collective violent actions have resulted in reprisal attacks from Tiv communities and counter-reprisal attacks from both sides, resulting in widespread violence in the Middle Belt. In doing so, this article enhances the analytical strength of Homer-Dixon's interpretation of the relative deprivation theory and structural theories of civil strife by introducing the concept of *political opportunity structure*. Taken together, these results contribute to broader debates on eco-violence by providing a more convincing account behind its escalation in recent times.

The article proceeds by describing the debate over the links between environmental resource scarcity, migration, and conflict. It then presents Homer-Dixon's interpretations of relative deprivation theory and structural theories of civil strife, arguing for the need to adapt his framework with the concept of the *political opportunity structure*. Following this, the article describes current debates on eco-violence in West Africa. Lastly, it shows how changes to the *political opportunity structure* have driven the escalation of eco-violence in the Middle Belt.

### **Environmental Scarcity, Migration and Conflict**

The debates on the links between environmental resource scarcity, migration and conflict can be separated into the neo-Malthusian and Cornucopian schools of thought. Neo-Malthusians

argue that population growth, environmental degradation, inequality in resource distribution, and an inability to adapt to such pressures have resulted in demand outstripping the supply of natural resources (14,37). This scenario leads to constrained agricultural productivity, migration, and social segmentation, fomenting conflict between different social groups. Other scholars argue that the migration of the Fulani across the Sahel and their involvement in Middle Belt violence fits the neo-Malthusian narrative (13,24).

Some scholars have criticised the neo-Malthusian model of the 'Toronto group' work. For example, they exaggerated the effects of population growth and environmental shortages on the outcome of a conflict (38). In addition, they ignored the historical and structural dimensions of violence (39). Furthermore, they use case studies with environmental degradation and violent conflict, rather than including cases without conflict where a forecast might be possible or not (38,40). And their theoretical model excluded factors related to politics and economics and their impacts on conflict eruptions (38).

The Cornucopian school contends that pressures on renewable resources foster the pursuit of technical knowledge to alleviate the problem of resource scarcity. Population pressure is thus conceived as a factor that boosts innovation, leading to economic prosperity and the deterrence of conflict (41,42). The Cornucopians also highlight a lack of evidence causally linking environmental pressures and scarcity to conflict (41,43). It is the abundance of resources, rather than scarcity, that fuels conflicts (15). Studies within West Africa concur with this argument (12,44). Neo-Malthusians and Cornucopians alike are criticized for overlooking structural-historical factors in the nexus of resource scarcity, conflict and migration (39,45). For instance, Matthew suggests that scholars must view violent conflict linked with population growth and environmental scarcity in the context of political history and structural forms of violence to avoid overlooking the effects of colonialism and economic globalisation (39).

The analysis in this article hinges on Homer-Dixon's interpretations of relative deprivation theory and structural theories of civil strife, to be referred to as the Homer-Dixon model, and was supported by arguments from the concept of the *political opportunity structure*. The relative deprivation theory and structural theories of civil strife – '... suggest that insurgency is a function of both the level of *grievance* motivating challenger groups and the *opportunities* available to these groups to act violently on their grievances' (14 italics in original). An increase in a group's sense of relative deprivation tends to increase their grievance level at the same time, and '... if the group perceives that the *structure of power relations* surrounding it has

changed in its favor, then it will perceive *greater opportunities* to address its *grievances*' (14 italics added). In other words, groups experiencing collective grievances will strive to recover their assumed deprived resources once favourable opportunities emerge.

A recent report<sup>4</sup> on the Sahel region coheres with Homer-Dixon's theories. It points to increased exposure of the region to climate change and its aftermaths (46). The report asserts that resource availability, seasonal fluctuations, droughts, and floods alter pastoral migration routes, increasing the likelihood of conflict between herders and farmers. Although the report agrees with the Cornucopians that there is no clear causal link between climate change and conflict, they assert an exacerbation of existing tensions and vulnerabilities through climate change interactions with political, social, and environmental factors. This report mirrors the arguments about the circumstances necessitating the plight of the Fulani herders and the farmers in the Middle Belt (30,47).

'By making some people poorer and weaker and others and more powerful, by causing people to move to new locations where they are often not wanted, and by weakening key institutions such as the state, environmental scarcity boosts grievances and changes the structure of opportunity facing the challenger groups' (48).

In other words, environmental scarcity causes inequality, migration to potentially hostile areas, and depreciation of political institutions, thereby exacerbating grievances and altering the opportunities available to the aggrieved group. Environmental scarcity depicts 'scarcity of renewable resources, such as cropland, forests, river water and fish stocks' and could result from resource depletion (supply instigated scarcity), over demand caused by population growth and over-consumption (demand instigated) and unequal distribution (structural scarcity) (14). However, ethnic cohesion within a group, 'advantageous opportunities', and resource mobilisation are thought to increase the likelihood of conflict erupting between contending groups (49,50).

Incorporating the concept of the *political opportunity structure* into Homer-Dixon's model hones its analytical strengths in processing the impact of political factors such as government policies, political instability, and political behaviour on conflict. Thus, this article could analyse the effects of *political factors* and the aftermath of *environmental scarcity* to explain the reasons for the escalation of eco-violence in the Middle Belt. Therefore, this paper enhanced

the analytical strength of Homer-Dixon's model with the concept of *political opportunity structure*, thereby, jointly, elevating the effects of political factors, grievances, and resource scarcity in explaining issues related to eco-violence.

A community's 'structure of political opportunities'<sup>5</sup> is influenced by '... the nature of the chief executive, the mode of aldermanic election, the distribution of social skills, and status, and the degree of social disintegration, taken individually or collectively, [including] the climate of governmental responsiveness and the level of community resources', which then offer opportunities or constraints to individuals in pursuing their political goals (51). In other words, the form of political divergences and organisational structures of governmental institutions, the tactics of elites and their challengers, and the pattern of coalitions within the party system all affect the political opportunity structures (52). The *political opportunity structure* indicates periods of struggle in the political environment that either impede or promote groups engaged in contentious politics (53). It is the 'general features of a regime [which] affect the opportunities and threats impinging on any potential maker of claims, and changes in those features produce changes in the character of contention' (36). These interpretations of the *political opportunity structure* are consistent with Homer-Dixon's notion that any event or activity that significantly undercuts the programme of the incumbent political structure produces political opportunities (14). The common themes in these definitions are 'opportunities' and 'constraints' offered in a political system that affects political behaviour. These definitions highlight some critical aspects of the *political opportunity structure: the emergence of a new regime with changes that alter who gets favoured or not among the contending groups within a certain period.*

The opportunity structure of a political system is relatively open if the government responds to citizens' needs and demands and provides opportunities for equal representation for all; it is relatively closed when powers are centralised, the government is ineffective, and people's opportunities are constrained (51). In places with open political opportunity structures, any change to the structures could either aid or hinder the roles of the members of the ruling political party and the opposition political parties without affecting the general populace. Whereas in political systems like Nigeria, where most political power is centralised and politics is substantially influenced by religion and ethnicity (53–55), a shift in *political opportunity structures* will constrain many people's opportunities. In Nigeria, access to state power ensures the possession of wealth and political appointments, and primordial relationships such as

ethnic, regional, and religious identities play a significant role in deciding recipients (54). Thus, the closed nature of *political opportunity structures* in Nigeria results from the centralisation of power and the impact of religion and ethnicity on politics, allowing for the allocation of opportunities and impediments to the populace based on ethnic and religious criteria. Ekeh's *civic* and *primordial publics* can further crystallise the nature of Nigeria's *political opportunity structures*.

He argues in his seminal article that modern African politics has two publics: the *civic public*, which is associated with politics and civic structures such as the civil service, and the security forces; and the *primordial public*, which is associated with primordial groupings, ties, and sentiments that influence individuals' public behaviour (55). The *civic public* to which Africans belong is regarded as immoral, as a place where a person may profit materially but lacks the drive to give back. While an individual's connection with the *primordial public* is moral, there is a responsibility to freely offer materially to this sector in exchange for little or nothing (55). In other words, individuals see the *civic public* (the political institutions) amorally and as the sector from which material goods may be harvested for the advantage of the primordial public. By contrast, the *primordial public*, which includes primordial groupings such as ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities, needs to be freely supplied to without regard for reciprocity. 'The unwritten is that it is legitimate to rob the civic public to strengthen the primordial public' (55). As a result, opportunities at the *civic public* level are unfairly provided to a specific *primordial* group at the expense of other *primordial* groups within the same political system. This dialectical conflict between the civic public and the primordial public explains why the opportunity structures in Nigeria are relatively *closed* and political opportunities are unequally distributed.

In summary, this article's analysis will be based on Homer-Dixon's model, which states that environmental scarcity and changes in socio-political processes result in political instability and the emergence of new regimes via elite alliances and elections, thereby altering the opportunity structures available in a system, including which contending group receives opportunities or is constrained (14,36,53).

### **Eco-violence in the Sahel**

Eco-violence is a term that refers to conflicts between communities over scarce resources that are exacerbated by demographic, economic, and political pressures (14). Others refer to eco-



violence as an ecological catastrophe, namely the harm to the ecosystem caused by expanding market capitalism and modern social systems (56); the deliberate killing of people, ecocide, and ecological sabotage (57); 'agential and structural' violence that affects nature and humans with or without conflict (58); and the illicit wildlife trade (59).

Eco-violence occurs within a profoundly multi-ethnic society and even among state actors. The rivalry for fertile land was the primary reason for the 1989 Senegal-Mauritania conflict (60,61), and access to rivers was one of the causes of Israel's six-day war with Arab nations in 1967 (62). While at times, the conflict involves actors sharing the same ethnic identity, as observed between the Igbo (63), Yoruba (64), and Fulani communities (65,66). The majority of conflicts occur between members of different ethnic groups (67,68).

The debates over the causes of eco-violence in Africa's Sahel have focused on adverse climatic conditions, human mobility and the influence of structural issues such as government policies. Recently, attention has shifted to how the vested interests of agricultural investors and elites and issues related to the framing and representation of people are shaping these conflicts.

Droughts and desertification, for example, have been argued to cause resource scarcity and climate-induced migration from the Sahel regions of Africa into the Guinea savannah and rain forest parts, potentially resulting in conflict between herders and farmers (25,26). Others contend that the abundance of resources, not scarcity, fuels conflict. Studies in Ghana and the 1989 Senegal-Mauritania crisis argue that abundance, not resource scarcity, caused conflict (12,44).

Within the farming communities, uncompensated crop and farm damage by cattle, uncontrolled grazing, rape incidents, pollution, and mass murder are the farmers' grievances, which lead to conflict with the herders (69,70). The herders' grievances include harassment in the host communities, cattle rustling, loss of lives, and denial of access to grazing fields (70–72). States' failures enable the emergence of ungoverned spaces that are conducive atmospheres for the proliferation of conflict (30,31,34). The proliferation of military-grade weapons fuels and elongates these conflicts (10,34). Among the contributing factors are the Federal Government of Nigeria's and various state governments' contradictory responses to issues of eco-violence (71,73). For instance, the promulgation of anti-open grazing law by some state governments and the Federal government's insistence on procuring grazing reserves for the Fulani herders are fuelling eco-violence (71,73).

Land-use systems, exclusionary behaviours, and conflicting regulatory frameworks have contributed to eco-violence in Nigeria, Ghana, and the Sahel region, particularly between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers (11,21,33,74). Among Nigerians, such socio-economic exclusions include the dichotomous classifications of some people, such as farmers as 'indigenes' and Fulani herders as 'settlers' (33,71,74,75).

The framing, construction and representation of people and conflicts have shaped the nature of these conflicts. The perception of Fulani herders as strangers and savages who have no rights to the land; likewise, the idea that farmers are indigenous and own the land, are among the contributing factors to the conflicts (11,67,70). Such framing has led to the perception of these conflicts in terms of a 'Fulanisation', securitisation and sedentarisation process (35,76).

Studies have identified the activities of investors in commercial agriculture and the interests of the elites as critical factors shaping the recent upsurge of eco-violence (10,26,32). It is not issues related to the climate, but mainly the elites' selfish interests that fuel conflict (32). Eco-violence and cattle rustling have increased in recent years due to the emergence of neo-pastoralism (10). *Neo-pastoralism* is a type of large-scale cattle ownership by non-pastoralists who employ paid pastoralists who use automatic rifles to herd cattle across Nigeria, with the primary goal of laundering illicit assets and profits (10). The Fulani herders' persistence not to abandon open grazing, discarding calls to adopt modern animal husbandry practices, is a multiplier of eco-violence (34). The escalating patterns of conflicts in the Middle Belt emerged in 2014 (7,34,35) and the introduction of automatic firearms made it possible (10,34). Yet, apart from a few studies (10,34), the literature is yet to engage adequately with the factors acting as catalysts for the unprecedented escalation of eco-violence in Nigeria. Thus, this paper explored the political developments since 2014 in Nigeria to understand the factors shaping the almost daily occurrences of mass violence in the Middle Belt.

### **The Escalation of Eco-violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt since 2014**

According to Homer-Dixon's model, changes within societies due to environmental scarcity and socio-political processes can lead to the formation of political alliances, the emergence of new regimes, and political instability, thereby increasing or decreasing the likelihood of contending groups to act (14,36,53). In the Nigerian context, the 2014 insecurity crisis in Nigeria (77,78) and the aftermaths of the 2015 general elections led to shifts in the political opportunity structure. The synergy of the political forces of the Northern and Western parts of

Nigeria in the 2015 general elections culminated in favourable election results for the opposition party led by General Muhammadu Buhari<sup>6</sup> and the removal of Dr Goodluck Jonathan as president (77,78). As a result, at the highest echelons of government, a new breed of government employees emerged, and collaborations between elites and militants became pronounced and thrived. As a result, the cost of collective action for the favoured group decreases while the degree of impunity increases. The most significant effect of the change in Nigeria's political opportunity structure was the entrenchment of unvarnished nepotistic domestic policies, which were reinforced by collaborations between elites and militias, creating a favourable environment for the escalation of eco-violence among Fulani herders and Tiv farmers.

### *Change in the Opportunity Structure*

Prior to the March 2015 elections, the security situation in Nigeria deteriorated, and the security apparatuses became overwhelmed (77). In January 2015, the Boko Haram terrorist group took control of 14 local government districts, encompassing an area the size of Belgium (79) and kidnapped the Chibok girls (78,80). When governments fail to provide security, non-state actors and criminals utilise the security vacuum to their advantage by carrying out violent activities (81). Consequently, non-state actors, like the Fulani herders, utilised such opportunities to redress their grievances, culminating in reprisal attacks by the Tiv militia and counter-reprisal attacks from both sides. Men who move in groups on motorbikes perpetrate these attacks using automatic rifles like the AK47 assault rifle (16). These issues were among the reasons for the high death rates recorded in 2014 in the Middle Belt.

A shift in the political opportunity structure culminated in Nigeria when Dr Goodluck Jonathan lost his re-election bid, and General Muhammadu Buhari became the president of Nigeria. The overbearing and nepotistic domestic policy objectives of the Buhari's regime was encapsulated in the answers to the question<sup>7</sup> posed to him. He stated that

I hope you have a copy of the election results. The constituents, for example, gave me 97% [of the vote] cannot in all honesty be treated on some issues with constituencies that gave me 5%. I think these are political reality (82).

In other words, people from areas, regions and ethnic nationalities who overwhelmingly voted for him will not be given the same opportunities as those who gave him little or no votes. This

rhetoric concurs with the argument that elections offer a shift in political opportunity structure, consequently, the opportunity to reward supporters and even identify political opponents that will be unfairly treated (36). The president of Nigeria's stance on issues carries immense weight and consequences because he is constitutionally mandated with enormous resources and influence, including the control of the army, the police, and the appointment of the heads of over 700 parastatals (78).

According to reports, Buhari appointed predominantly Muslim men from Northern Nigeria as heads of almost all security agencies and directors of sensitive government ministerial agencies, giving these groups an edge (83,84). It has been argued that those appointments were impartial based on the information from the Federal Character Commission (FCC); the members of the commission<sup>8</sup> are appointed by the Presidency (85). Nonetheless, Fasan's argument is based on the notion that it is not quantity but the quality that matters (83); six of Nigeria's eight security agencies are led by Muslim Northerners (the army, air force, police, national intelligence agency, and state security service). In contrast, only two positions were given to officers from the southern parts of Nigeria. Some argue that 99.99% of federal ministers and heads of government agencies in Nigeria are of Fulani ethnicity (86). The statistic of 99.99 per cent is implausible, but the narratives that Muslim men from the north, mainly Fulani, Hausa, and Kanuri men, command the most vital and critical federal ministries, security agencies, and paramilitary organisations in Nigeria are undeniable. Similarly, President Buhari is constructing a \$1.9 billion train link between Kano State in Nigeria and Maradi in the Niger Republic (87) because, in his words, 'I have cousins, family members, etc., in the Niger Republic. I should not just cut them off' (88). Thus, the project aims to facilitate foreigners' access to Nigeria; yet, many of the country's largest cities remain unconnected to the national rail network.

While most Nigerians think Buhari is a Fulani man, Prof Kperogi believes that although his father was Fulani, he is not culturally or linguistically Fulani because he grew up with his maternal Kanuri people (89). In Nigeria, people's indigenous status is connected to their patrilocal ancestry (90).

From 2015 to 2018, the federal government of Nigeria increased its efforts to secure free land for Fulani herders through various bills sent to the national assembly meant to be enacted into law. Such efforts were consistent with the concept of *resource capture*, which entails the

inequitable allocation and use of state resources using government instruments to benefit a preferred group to the detriment of others (50). Some of the bills were:

- A. National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill, 2015 (HB 448)
- B. National Grazing Route and Reserve Commission (Establishment) Bill, 2016 (HB 539).
- C. National Grazing Reserves Agency (Establishment) Bill, 2016

Those bills were opposed by legislators from Nigeria's Middle Belt and South, and as a result, they were never passed. Similarly, on 1st July of 2019, President Buhari came up with a new initiative to solve the eco-violence in Nigeria and termed it 'RUGA Settlement'. President Buhari argued that 'RUGA' will stop eco-violence and will lead to high agricultural productivity and everyone's *well-being* in Nigeria (91). In May 2021, the 17 state governors from Southern Nigeria jointly banned open grazing of cattle within their region (92,93). However, on June 10, 2021, President Buhari reiterated his support for open grazing in Nigeria and the re-establishment of cattle grazing routes (94,95). These contradictory policies fuel eco-violence. The federal government has the option of persuading state governors to cede land to the RUGA project, or simply turning a blind eye as militias seize land through violence. The law is on the governors' side because Nigeria's 1978 National Land Use Act vested state governors with the legal authority to manage land within their jurisdictions (71,96). The grazing reserve bills and the RUGA initiative are classic examples of resource capture mechanisms to favour a group at the detriment of other groups and are among the factors escalating conflict. It instils a sense of deprivation in both farmers and Fulani herders, and as it grows, so does their sense of grievance and conflicts.

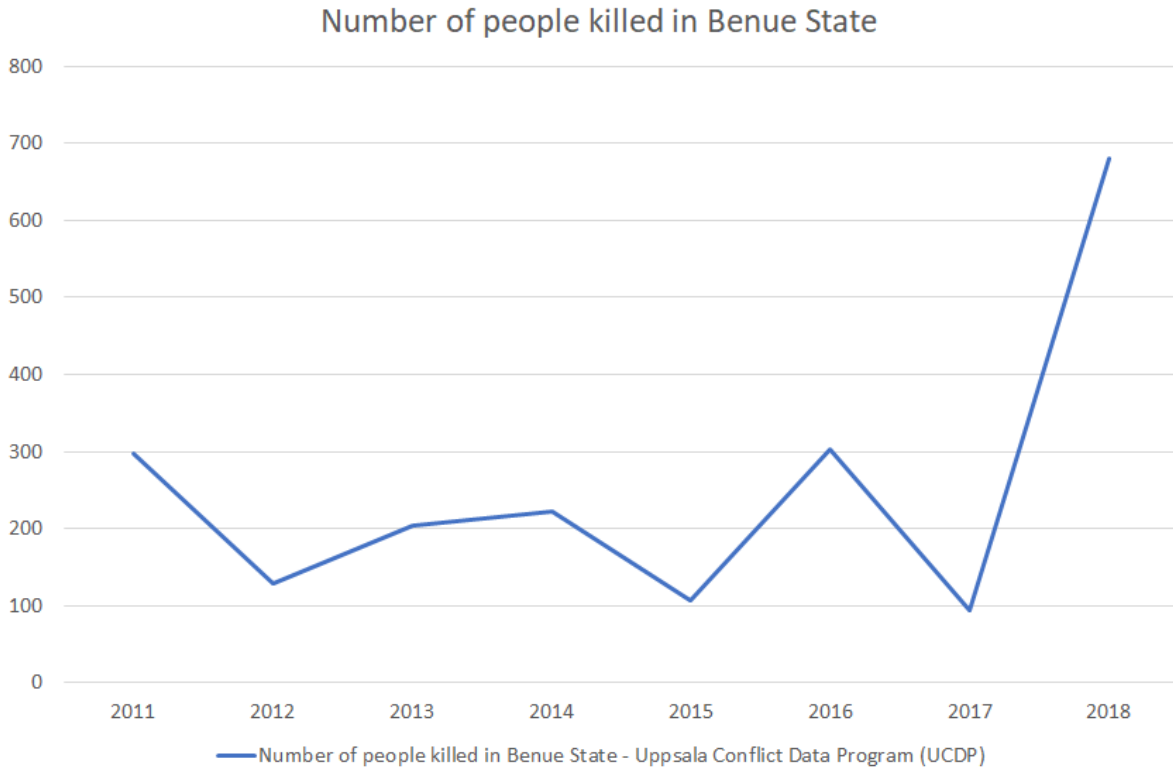


Figure 2. Source of data: (97)

There were links between the spikes in violence and debates over the grazing reserve bills in the legislative house. Figure 2 illustrates a decrease in death rates in 2015 but an increase in deaths in 2016 when the exercise failed, but when new bills were introduced in 2016, a decline in mortality rates occurred in 2017. However, because none of the bills passed, mortality rates increased in 2018. The year 2018 began with the slaughter of about 72 people on New Year's Eve in Benue state by Fulani herders (71,98).

The consequences of the shift in Nigeria's *political opportunity structure* have also created a system in which not all conflicts receive the same level of intervention. For example, the government recently argued that Boko Haram insurgents and IPOB separatists should not be compared to the so-called bandits – kidnapping and murdering people – in the Middle Belt, North West, and other parts of Nigeria because the latter lacked flags and believe Nigeria's sovereignty,' in contrast to the former, who seek to establish independent countries (99,100).

Insecurity has become widespread in Nigeria, and security forces appear to be overwhelmed by the country's multiple conflicts, including the Boko Haram insurgency and separatist operations in the south-east and west. While the link between Boko Haram terrorists and Fulani militias remains a source of contention, a new study asserts that Boko Haram collaborates with

Fulani militants, supplying them with military-grade weaponry and techniques akin to those employed by the Taliban or al-Qaeda (101). This situation is epitomised by the attack on August 24, 2021, by those referred to as the *bandits*, which resulted in the death and kidnapping of security officials at the country's highest military academy, the Nigerian Defence Academy in Kaduna (102). Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Nigerian President recently paid a \$50,000 ransom to *bandits* near his home state to retrieve a truck-mounted 12.7-millimetre anti-aircraft gun that posed a grave threat to his aircraft (103). Reports have linked the ongoing mass kidnapping of people, mainly schoolchildren, by busloads to eco-violence (103,104). In December 2020, 344 boys from a secondary school in Katsina were kidnapped for ransom (105); many more have been kidnapped since then. Nigerians paid over \$18 million as ransom to kidnappers between June 2011 and March 2020 (106). According to reports, government authorities assert that most *bandits* kidnapping people are Fulani men, mainly former herders who have lost their means of subsistence (104,107).

Thus, what is understood as President Buhari's nepotistic domestic policies justified the contending groups' grievances and provided an enabling atmosphere for them, in this case, the Fulani herders, to redress their grievances, resulting in the rise of eco-violence.

#### *Collaboration between the Elites and Militants*

The escalation of mass violence and killings can occur through the synergy of forces between leaders and militants when most people remain idly in fear and the radical group has won an election (108). In the Nigerian context, some elites have been accused of collaborating with militants on both sides of the conflict. For instance, the former Minister of Defence, General Theophilus Danjuma, urged Nigerians to 'defend yourselves or you will all die' because the security forces in Nigeria are colluding with Fulani herders to attack communities (109,110). A report corroborated the claim that the military collaborated with Fulani herders to kill people (16). Sheikh Ahmad Gumi accused some segments of the Nigerian military of 'arming' and 'colluding' with the Fulani militia and described the ongoing eco-violence in Nigeria as a '*tribal war*' between the Fulani herders and other '*tribes*' (111,112). Both assertions of military-herder coordination appear plausible, given that both were senior military officers and prominent Nigerians with reputations to preserve. Some clergy and leaders of cattle breeders' associations facilitate ransom negotiations on behalf of the Fulani herders (104,113).

The governor of Kaduna State, Mallam Nasir El-Rufai, has been accused of taking sides in the eco-violence in Southern Kaduna (114). However, Mallam El-Rufai stated that he bribed certain Fulani herders, using the government's cash, to refrain from killing farmers in Southern Kaduna (115). In Benue State, some politicians were accused of collaborating with Mr. Terwase "Gana" Akwaza (116). The former and incumbent Governors of Benue State, Mr. Gabriel Suswan and Mr. Samuel Ortom accused the Nigerian Army of extra-judicial killing of 'Gana' (117). Mr. 'Gana' was a 'feared leader' of a Tiv militia group credited with defending the Tiv people against Fulani herds and Jukun people; he was also labelled as a 'dreaded criminal' (116).

Mr. Femi Adesina's opinions on eco-violence on AIT TV might be seen as tacit support for the Fulani herds, he said

Ancestral attachment? You can only have ancestral attachment when you are alive. If you are talking about ancestral attachment, if you are dead, how does the attachment matter? If your state [government] genuinely does not have land for ranching, it is understandable. But where you have land and you can do something, please do for peace. What will the land be used for if those who own it are dead at the end of the day? (118).

In other words, the Buhari's administration urges citizens to cede their lands to Fulani herders for peace to reign; if they do not, they risk losing their lives and their land. Such a stance can increase grievances on both sides because people's behaviour in a political system is determined by the kind of 'opening', obstacles, and resources provided by the political system (51).

Impunity is another issue that has resulted from the shift in the political opportunity structure; most of the perpetrators of eco-violence are never apprehended or prosecuted. For example, Mr. Garius Gololo, the head of a Fulani socio-cultural group who claimed responsibility for the New Year's Eve massacre, has yet to face charges (119). Similarly, no member of the Fulani Nationality Movement (FUNAM), which claimed responsibility for the attempted assassination of the governor of Benue state in March 2021, has been apprehended (120).

These narratives show a collaboration between the elites and the militants in the Middle Belt. When the shift in the political opportunity structure advantages a militia, they are prone to commit mass murder and may enjoy impunity, just like the case of the Fulani herders receiving



payments from government officials. Whereas, when a militia is constrained by the change in the political opportunity structure, carrying out collective action becomes very expensive and less successful, as in the case of 'Gana'. In this context, the shift in the political opportunity structure offered opportunity and constraints to different groups at the same time. It depicts the precarious nature and implications of nepotistic domestic policies of the government and elite collaborations with militias in these escalating violent conflicts. Those favoured by the political opportunity structure are encouraged and appeased, whereas others are constrained and punished. As a result, Nigeria's existing political opportunity structure favours Fulani herders, who are unleashing terror against Tiv farming communities to redress perceived grievances like access to grazing pastures, prompting Tiv reprisal assaults. Thus, the Tiv farming communities and their elected officials are disadvantaged by the present political opportunity structure.

These narratives are consistent with the arguments of Homer-Dixon's model and are significant contributors to the Middle Belt's unparalleled eco-violence. Because democracy's fundamental principles require a transfer of power at some point, *political opportunity structures* in democracies will continually change. What should matter, particularly in countries like Nigeria, is how an impending *political opportunity structure* is made to favour every segment of the society by providing equal chances to all primordial groups at the *civic public* without jeopardising the opportunities available to the people at the *primordial public*. This might be achieved by enacting laws that make it more difficult for changes to the *political opportunity structures* to be hijacked to benefit a particular population segment. This approach should be prioritised as it serves the broad populace's interests without undue appeal to primordial groupings and feelings.

## **Conclusion**

By examining the political developments in Nigeria since 2014 and the aftermaths of the 2015 general election, as well as the subsequent shift in political opportunity structures and their connection to the Middle Belt's ongoing mass violence, this article has contributed to our understanding of eco-violence by providing a unique lens through which to view these conflicts and a deeper understanding of the factors that have fuelled their recent escalation in public discourse. This article departs from existing literature on the causes and manifestations of eco-violence to investigate the factors influencing its escalation to unprecedented levels in Nigeria. It highlights contemporary theoretical and empirical debates on eco-violence by engaging with

the arguments about environmental resource scarcity and conflict before introducing the expanded Homer-Dixon model that underpins the analysis in this article. It argues that in Nigeria, *political opportunity structures* and the possibility of groups to redress their grievances are inextricably linked to political power centralisation, government inaction, and the structure of elite alliances with diverse segments of society; and that when *political opportunity structures change* in favour of a contending group, that group will seek redress violently.

It suggests the creation of a decentralised system of natural resource and security governance to rein in the central government's excessive powers (78) by devolving police authority to the federating units (121,122), as well as a resource ownership structure in which the federating units exercise greater control over natural resources within their domains (123), as is the case in other federal systems. While this approach may have its flaws, if effectively implemented, it will significantly reduce the enormous powers accessible to the central government, limit the misuse of and inept responses from security forces in the Middle Belt and address issues connected to resource use. This strategy may limit the manipulation of changes in *political opportunity structures* to benefit a specific population segment. Additionally, if the repercussions of the current political opportunity structure are not addressed, the ramifications of the next *political opportunity structure* shift in 2023 would be devastating for Nigeria.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 'RUGA' is a Federal Government of Nigeria policy aimed at securing free land and grazing settlements for Fulani herders from Nigeria's 36 state governments.

<sup>2</sup> According to (4), a 2017 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) indicated that fatalities from conflicts between farmers and herders outnumbered those from the Boko Haram insurgency.

<sup>3</sup> Figures calculated from data received from the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The report was the research output of researchers at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

<sup>5</sup> Eisinger first conceived the concept of political opportunity structure(51).

<sup>6</sup> President Buhari came to power on 31 December 1983 after successfully overthrowing the government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari.

<sup>7</sup> The event was at the U.S. Institute of Peace offices in Washington, DC., less than two months after being sworn in as President.

<sup>8</sup> For a list of new members of the FCC appointed on 27th April 2021, see Shibayan (2020).