Impact of Ungoverned Spaces on
Nigeria's
Counterinsurgency Efforts

by Chinedu N. Chikwe

The existence of ungoverned spaces has remained a disturbing challenge to nations across the world. This is because they serve as safe havens for the activities of non-state actors such as terrorists, insurgents, bandits and other organized crime syndicates. This phenomenon threatens the security and political economy of affected nations, causing citizens to live in fear. In Africa, Mali, Libya, and Somalia are prominent countries that continue to struggle with insecurity resulting from the existence of massive expanse of ungoverned spaces. The absence of effective governance in parts of Somalia has allowed Al-Shabaab insurgent groups to establish their presence, imposing its version of governance on citizens.[1] Nigeria has had its fair share of challenges with ungoverned spaces in recent years. Large states like Niger, Kaduna, Zamfara, and Borno continue to witness security challenges in remote areas with limited government presence.

Ungoverned spaces refer to geographical areas within a country where government presence and control are limited or absent.[2] Angel Rabasa et al. refer to ungoverned spaces as areas of contested, incomplete or abdicated governance.[3] Such abdication occurs in situations when a government, either by choice or force, abandons its control over certain portions of its territory.[4] In such areas, state institutions are unable to enforce law and order, provide essential services, and implement government programs. Unfortunately, the absence of governance creates a vacuum that non-state actors attempt to fill. On the other hand, the United Nations Development Program defines insurgency as a violent political struggle by a non-state actor or group against a government or other authority, often aimed at overthrowing the existing order.[5] To curb any insurgency, counterinsurgency efforts involving a combination of military, political, economic, and social measures need to be taken by

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the government. The goal of counterinsurgency is not just to defeat the insurgents militarily, but also to address its root causes, win the support of the population, and restore governance.

The proliferation of ungoverned spaces within Nigeria poses a grave threat to national security, social cohesion, and economic development. Characterized by the lack of effective state control, ungoverned spaces have become breeding grounds for insurgent activities, terrorism, organized crimes, and the illegal exploitation of natural resources.[6] The existence of ungoverned areas complicates the security challenges faced by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), hindering efforts to combat insurgency, protect citizens, and promote socio-economic development. It is against this backdrop that the FGN requires proactive measures to dominate ungoverned spaces across the country to curb its effect on national security.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of Nigeria's vast ungoverned spaces on the FGN's counterinsurgency efforts. The paper covers a basic understanding of ungoverned spaces and explains some of their characteristics. Thereafter, it looks into the impact of ungoverned spaces on Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts before suggesting the way forward. Being a large country, this paper is restricted to ungoverned spaces in the Northeast and Northwest regions of Nigeria.

Understanding the Context of Ungoverned Spaces

According to Andrew J. Taylor, an ungoverned territory is a place where the state or central government is unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern or influence the local population.[7] It could also be an area where a provincial, local, tribal, or autonomous government does not fully or effectively govern due to inadequate governance capacity, insufficient political will, gaps in legitimacy,

conflict, or restrictive behavioral norms.[8] Ungoverned spaces could also be areas where a fractional government presence or an area that is poorly governed by the existing formal authorities exists.[9] Unfortunately, conflicts, terrorism, drug trafficking, and other criminal activities are often the consequence of most ungoverned spaces, causing loss of lives and properties.[10] The locations of violent conflicts since 2015 cross the entire Sahel region of Africa.[11] Analysis of these locations reveals that these conflicts are mostly in areas with minimal government presence.

Ungoverned territories can be failed or failing states, poorly controlled land or maritime borders, airspace, or areas within otherwise viable states where the central government's authority does not extend.[12] The U.S. Department of Defense described the phenomenon as an environment not effectively governed, under-governed, or ill-governed by the state or central government as a result of conflict, violence or inadequate governance capacity.[13] Such an environment provides a fertile terrain for bandits, criminals, and terrorist networks.[14]

> **Attributes of ungoverned spaces include the absence of government institutions, law enforcement agencies, healthcare facilities, and welfare programs.**

Attributes of ungoverned spaces include the absence of government institutions, law enforcement agencies, healthcare facilities, and welfare programs.[15] The lack of these fundamental state establishments to dictate the rules and regulations of everyday life encourages citizens to seek succour from unofficial sources. In most cases, the inhabitants of such ungoverned spaces are forced to seek justice and protection from individuals or organizations without recourse to their legitimacy. Unfortunately, the

individuals or organizations with the capacity to deliver some form of justice and security within an ungoverned territory are often religious extremists, terrorists, bandits and other similar criminal networks. Additionally, the lack of government presence in ungoverned spaces manifests in low adherence to state laws. Thus, illegal activities such as the illicit exploration of natural resources and smuggling attract almost no penalty due to the absence of state institutions. These, amongst others, have been identified as major characteristics of ungoverned spaces.

> **...inhabitants of ungoverned spaces generally suffer from poverty, poor education, poor healthcare, and limited employment opportunities.**

Characteristics of Ungoverned Spaces

Ungoverned spaces could exist in both developed and developing nations and are not limited to rural or less populated areas. However, certain characteristics often make ungoverned spaces conducive to the activities of non-state actors. First, ungoverned spaces lack a consistent and effective presence of government institutions such as law enforcement, schools and healthcare facilities. Border communities in Nigeria's northeastern states of Borno and Adamawa are prime examples of limited state presence.[16] Boko Haram, the Islamist group that continues to terrorize citizens in northeastern Nigeria, has historically used the dense Sambisa Forest in Borno State as a stronghold to plan and execute insurgent attacks on innocent citizens due to the absence of government control.[17] Therefore, establishing state institutions in such ungoverned spaces would ensure government control and encourage economic activities in these areas. In addition, the presence of government institutions

would ensure that the rule of law is maintained.

Connected to limited government presence in most ungoverned spaces is the lack of formal legal systems and law enforcement agencies.[18] The lack of law enforcement agencies often creates a vacuum in enforcing law and order in such areas. Hence, local militias, bandits, and extremist groups take advantage of this gap to impose their own illegitimate rules and systems of justice on residents. In recent years, parts of Kaduna State in Northwestern Nigeria have experienced the absence of the rule of law due to the activities of bandit groups.[19] These groups take advantage of the near absence of law enforcement in remote areas to execute illegal activities like extortion and kidnapping. It is therefore pertinent that the FGN enshrines formal legal systems in remote communities to discourage the activities of criminals and encourage socioeconomic activities.

Furthermore, inhabitants of ungoverned spaces generally suffer from poverty, poor education, poor healthcare, and limited employment opportunities.[20] These deprivations make the local populace susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups. Rural areas in Nigeria's northeastern states have faced socio-economic deprivations over the years, contributing to the vulnerability of their youth to radicalization by Boko Haram Terrorists (BHT).[21] Thus, deliberate efforts could be made to establish empowerment programs in such communities to improve residents' living standards. Empowering the rural populace would help reduce radicalization and make extremist ideologies unattractive. This could be achieved by improving the social amenities and infrastructures in rural and isolated communities, particularly those close to the borders.

Besides socio-economic deprivations, other basic infrastructures like roads and communication networks are often lacking in ungoverned spaces, making it difficult for the government to extend its reach to residents. For

example, the lack of electricity, good roads, and communication networks in most border communities in Nigeria hamper efforts at establishing government presence.[22] The lack of infrastructure also makes it difficult for security agencies to respond quickly in times of crisis.[23] Although establishing infrastructure could be expensive, FGN could take deliberate measures to progressively improve basic infrastructures in vulnerable remote communities. Such infrastructure could also serve as a means of unifying communities divided across ethnic or tribal lines.

Finally, some ungoverned spaces are categorized by deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and tribal divisions, which hinders efforts to establish unified governance. Hence, insurgents and other non-state actors take advantage of the absence of a unified governance structure in these areas to perpetrate their nefarious activities. An example is the Southern Kaduna region in northwestern Nigeria, which continues to face ethnic and religious divisions, making it challenging to maintain an acceptable security arrangement.[24] This leaves such areas vulnerable to conflict and exploitation by armed groups. Establishing neutral mediation and conflict resolution committees could help foster unity and bring opposing factions together. If adequately resourced, such committees would help to build peace and unity amongst conflicting communities.

Impact of Ungoverned Spaces on Nigeria's Counterinsurgency Efforts

Ungoverned spaces create an environment conducive to insurgent and terrorist activities in several ways. For example, they provide a fertile ground for the recruitment and radicalization of insurgents due to the lack of formal education and limited economic opportunities available in such areas.[25] The absence of state-run schools and social programs leaves a void that extremist ideologies effortlessly occupy. In addition, the high levels of unemployment and poverty in ungoverned areas often push young and energetic inhabitants towards joining insurgent groups that offer vague promises of financial freedom and a sense of purpose. Unfortunately, the isolation of such rural communities from the outside world makes them vulnerable to these types of extremist propaganda. This is made worse as such residents often do not have access to alternative narratives. Establishing educational facilities and economic opportunities in ungoverned spaces would enable the FGN to offer alternative narratives and better economic prospects. Such institutions would also help to improve the living standards of residents and diminish the likelihood of such areas becoming safe havens for insurgents.

> **... ungoverned spaces serve as safe havens for insurgent activities...**

In addition to providing a fertile ground for recruitment and radicalization, ungoverned spaces serve as safe havens for insurgent activities primarily because of the limited government presence in such areas.[26] Limited law enforcement, government services, and infrastructure provide insurgents with the opportunity to operate without immediate decisive intervention. Also, difficult-to-access terrains in some ungoverned areas make it challenging for security forces to dominate.[27] Insurgent groups exploit these geographic challenges to establish bases and training camps. Therefore, improving access to remote communities would reduce their susceptibility as safe havens for insurgent and criminal groups, while also boosting the social and economic viability of such areas.

Ungoverned spaces in Nigeria have significant economic and social implications, profoundly impacting development and national

security. First, the activities of insurgents in ungoverned spaces often lead to the disruption of agriculture, trade, and business activities.[28] Criminal activities like extortion, looting, and kidnapping discourage economic activities and investment in affected regions.[29] Also, attacks on government infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, telecommunication masts, and power plants cause loss of revenue to the government. This further emphasizes the need for the FGN to dominate ungoverned spaces in order to sustain their socioeconomic survival, particularly in the area of agriculture.

> **...insecurity in ungoverned spaces often leads to the displacement of farmers who are forced to abandon their farmlands due to the fear of violence...**

Relatedly, the insecurity in ungoverned spaces often leads to the displacement of farmers who are forced to abandon their farmlands due to the fear of violence or coercion by insurgent groups.[30] Such disruption in the agricultural value chain causes food shortages in both rural and urban areas. This is because the inability of farmers to cultivate their lands decreases food production, leading to scarcity in supply and a consequent increase in the price of commodities.[31] While maintaining a strong military presence in ungoverned spaces would encourage farmers to cultivate their farmlands, the FGN could further support such farmers with access to improved seeds, equipment and training. The government could also invest in irrigation, storage, transportation, and buy-back schemes, in order to enhance the entire agricultural value chain. These measures would ensure that farmers can seamlessly move their products to market, thereby increasing the standard of living in such rural communities. This would ultimately reduce the likelihood of youths within these communities joining insurgent groups.

Similarly, the security vacuum in ungoverned spaces forces civilians to flee their homes and ancestral communities, causing internal displacement.[32] Internally displaced persons (IDPs) face dire living conditions, compounded by the lack of access to basic necessities and limited healthcare. This humanitarian crisis puts additional pressure on government resources and hampers development efforts. In some cases, the insecurity in ungoverned spaces could lead to a refugee influx into neighboring countries.[33] This influx places a strain on regional stability and resources as host countries struggle to accommodate and provide for the basic needs of these refugees.[34] The FGN could collaborate with international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure adequate support for those affected by conflict. Such support could be through the provision of food, clean water, healthcare and shelter, while the process of reconstruction and reintegration progresses. In addition, the FGN could offer psychosocial support to individuals who have experienced various degrees of trauma due to conflict.

Way Forward

In addressing the impact of Nigeria's ungoverned spaces on its counterinsurgency efforts, the FGN needs to take certain proactive steps. These steps could include reviving local government administrations across states, strengthening traditional institutions, and establishing an effective border management system. In addition, the government could encourage cooperative agriculture and decentralize government institutions from state capitals and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) to improve government presence across the country.

Revive Local Government Administration

Reinvigorating the local government administration as an independent layer of

government is essential to re-establishing the presence of government in ungoverned spaces.[35] This is vital since the local government remains the only tier of government with a direct focus on local communities, businesses and traditional institutions.[36] Regrettably, most Nigerian state governors appoint Transition Committee Chairpersons to administer the local government areas within their states, instead of democratically elected local government Chairpersons.[37] The few governors who conduct local government elections often compromise the process through undemocratic practices.[38] Ensuring the existence of elected local government authorities would ensure grassroot governance and engender public confidence in the government's capacity to protect its citizens.[39] It would also form the building blocks for executing community-level security strategies by leveraging the influence of traditional institutions that have been in existence for generations.

Strengthening Traditional Institutions

Strengthening traditional institutions in Nigeria would help revive local governance in areas with little federal government presence. Many Nigerian communities maintain traditional institutions that pre-date Nigeria as a nation.[40] The FGN needs to support such local structures due to their general acceptance by the local populace. Strengthening traditional institutions would ensure accountability in maintaining security within remote communities.[41] Pre-independence administration in Nigeria recognized the significant role of traditional institutions in safeguarding communities.[42] Even without technology, traditional leaders were able to take effective control of their spaces regardless of size. Community-based feedback systems were in place to monitor which strangers entered a territory.[43] The Nigerian government could revive this initiative by empowering and supporting traditional institutions as the unofficial fourth tier of government. This would

ensure a bottom-up approach to re-establishing government presence and acceptance across affected communities. It would also awaken traditional leaders of border communities to the responsibility of monitoring their respective borders against illegal migrants and activities of transnational organized criminals.

> **...Nigeria's porous borders and numerous ungoverned spaces continue to compromise its sovereignty and security.**

Effective Border Management

The effective management of Nigeria's borders would assist in administering ungoverned spaces and monitoring cross-border movements. Unfortunately, Nigeria's porous borders and numerous ungoverned spaces continue to compromise its sovereignty and security. According to Abdullahi D Mohammed, "almost all conflicts in the country, including banditry, kidnap for ransom and other forms of terrorism are inordinately carried out on the fringes of border communities whose territories have remained ungoverned for decades."[44] Furthermore, porous borders allow for easy movement of weapons, natural resources and commercial goods, making it difficult to track and apprehend.[45] The FGN could take deliberate measures to monitor all border entry points to curb illegal activities and strengthen border security measures. This would ensure that border areas are not left ungoverned, thereby curbing insurgent activities and improving the local trade and agro-based economy.

Encourage Cooperative Agriculture

Cooperative agriculture involves small-scale farmers coming together to pool resources, share knowledge, and collectively market their produce.[46] By collaborating, farmers can

invest in better farming practices, machinery, and irrigation systems, thereby enhancing agricultural productivity and fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility within rural communities.[47] Communities involved in cooperative farming are more likely to invest in local infrastructure such as schools, healthcare facilities, water supply, and security, thereby enhancing the overall counterinsurgency efforts of the government. The FGN could also support farmers by directing resources toward building cooperative agriculture networks within ungoverned spaces. Such networks would improve the living standards of the inhabitants and promote government presence in such communities.

> ...another major challenge is the existing language barrier between Nigeria and its neighbors. Nigeria's official language is English, while the official language of all its neighbors is French.

Decentralize Government Institutions

Decentralizing government institutions from state capitals could play a pivotal role in reflecting government presence in ungoverned spaces. Decongesting state capitals by establishing government institutions in remote communities would ensure a more equitable distribution of government presence.[48] The establishment of government infrastructure in rural areas will influence the appropriation of funds for essential projects such as schools, hospitals and roads, leading to improved living conditions for inhabitants. It is generally known that overcrowded cities often struggle to provide adequate services to residents due to the strain on their infrastructure. By encouraging development in ungoverned spaces, the infrastructure burden on urban centres is reduced. Therefore, the FGN

is encouraged to relocate state institutions from state capitals to smaller cities in order to increase economic activities in such areas. This would discourage the occupation of such spaces by insurgents and other criminal networks.

Conclusion

The existence of ungoverned spaces has remained a worrying challenge to countries across the world as they offer safe havens for the activities of terrorists, insurgents, bandits and other organized criminals. This situation threatens the security and political economy of the affected nations, causing citizens to live in fear. To curb the menace of insecurity perpetuated by these criminals, efforts could be made to establish state institutions in areas with limited government presence. The presence of government institutions in ungoverned spaces would ensure that the rule of law is maintained.

Similarly, inhabitants of ungoverned spaces are generally faced with poverty, poor education, poor healthcare, and limited employment opportunities. Basic infrastructures like roads and communication networks are often lacking in such areas, making it difficult for the government to extend its reach to residents. These deprivations make the local populace susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups. Therefore, deliberate efforts could be made to establish empowerment programs and progressively expand the infrastructure in rural and isolated communities to improve residents' living standards.

In the same vein, ungoverned spaces provide a fertile ground for the recruitment and radicalization of residents due to the lack of formal education and limited economic opportunities. Unfortunately, the isolation of such rural residents from the outside world makes them vulnerable to extremist propaganda. The security implication of these significantly impacts food production as farmers are unable to cultivate their farmlands. The resultant effect

is an increasing need for humanitarian interventions in such areas. Thus, improving educational facilities and economic opportunities in ungoverned spaces would allow the government to offer better opportunities to rural residents.

Furthermore, improving access to remote communities would reduce their susceptibility as safe havens for insurgent groups, while also boosting their social and economic viability. Also, the FGN could support farmers with access to improved seeds, equipment, and training. The FGN could also invest in irrigation, storage, transportation, and buy-back schemes to enhance the entire agricultural value chain. In addition, efforts could be made to collaborate with NGOs and other humanitarian organizations to ensure adequate support for victims of conflict.

Addressing the impact of ungoverned spaces on Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts would require several multifaceted approaches. These approaches could involve reviving local government administration as an autonomous tier of government and strengthening traditional institutions. Autonomous local government authorities would ensure grassroots governance and engender public confidence in the government's capacity to protect its citizens. Furthermore, empowering traditional institutions and the effective management of Nigeria's porous borders would assist in administering ungoverned spaces and monitoring cross-border movements.

Finally, the FGN could also support farmers by building cooperative agriculture networks within ungoverned spaces. Such networks would improve the living standards of the inhabitants and promote government presence in such communities. Also, the FGN could relocate some government institutions from state capitals to smaller cities in order to increase economic activities in such areas. This would discourage the occupation of such spaces by insurgents and other criminal networks.**IAJ**

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