CHAPTER 6

ANATOMY OF CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Living beings everywhere fight over scarce resources and means of existence. Such competitions are sometimes peaceful, but they turn out to be violent in most situations when rivals seek to hamper, disable, or destroy their competitors in pursuit of mutually desired goals. Deng captures this scenario when he observes that conflicts are proof of situations where interaction involving two or more parties in which actions in pursuit of incompatible objectives or interests result in varying degrees of discord between normally harmonious and cooperative relations and a disruptive adversarial confrontation that may culminate at its worst in high-intensity violence.¹

While it is accepted that conflicts have devastating effects on society, some conflict situations are considered functional and productive. A conflict is functional or constructive when it improves the quality of decision, stimulates creativity and innovation through which problems can be solved, tensions released, and an environment of self-evaluation and change is enhanced. Here, conflict is perceived to be about positive change especially in the sociopolitical structures and institutions as well as in human relations and in the distribution of societal resources.² This clarification is important to understanding the challenge of conflicts in Northern Nigeria since the past two decades.

Northern Nigeria has emerged as a theater for harvesting various forms of conflicts that provoke depopulation, devastation, and defoliation. This
assertion is not unconnected with the rate of illiteracy, poverty, environmental hazards and rising wave of violence that have characterized inter-group relations in the region since the 1990s. Sharp ethnoreligious divide, struggle for political space, and dwindling land and water resources have combined with divergent sociocultural, economic, and political factors to stimulate and perpetuate armed conflicts and insecurity in the region. The implications of these conflicts to political stability, pursuit of development, and national security in Nigeria have provoked both policy and academic endeavors on the subject matter.

It is against this background that this chapter interrogates the scourge of conflicts in Northern Nigeria since 1999. Efforts are made to identify the nature, causes, and consequences of these conflicts in the region. This is complemented by an investigation into the consequences of these conflicts as well as official measures at containing them.

Understanding Northern Nigeria

In Nigeria’s geopolitical equation, Northern Nigeria has three out of the six geopolitical zones that constitute the Nigerian state. These are the North East, North West, and North Central zones. The North East comprises of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, and Yobe while the North West comprises of Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Kwara, Sokoto, and Zamfara. The North East and North West are inhabited by majority indigenous Muslim population. In addition to the Muslim population, the North East and North West are also inhabited by a minority indigenous Christian population and migrant settlers of mostly Christian faith. The North Central zone comprises of Benue, Plateau, Kogi, Nassarawa, Niger and Taraba States. These states share a fairly competing population of Christians and Muslims. It is also important to note that Nigeria’s Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) is situated within the North Central geopolitical zone.

The National Orientation Agency (NOA) observes that over 50 percent of ethnic groups in Nigeria are indigenous inhabitants of Northern Nigeria. The culture of Islam is predominant in the region with a relatively fewer population practicing Christianity and Traditional African Religions. In addition, the region is endowed with massive land for agriculture and grazing activities. Finally, the NOA also observed that the zone has a large pool of ex-servicemen. Culturally, the dominant indigenous ethnic group in Northern Nigeria is the Hausa/Fulani. The minority ethnic groups include Birom, Afuziri, Tiv, Igede, Idoma, Angas, Tarok, Eggon, Gwari, Nupe, and Jukun. Others are Bachama, Kataf, Igala