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An Evaluation of Violent Terrorist Groups, Conflict and Development in the Sahel-Sahara Region

Moshood Saka[1]

Abstract: Sahel-Sahara region has been enduring series of conflicts which range from varying degrees with detrimental impacts on the lives of millions of inhabitants living in the region. While many studies have strongly affirmed this assertion, the emerging states are divided in terms of secular religion, pastoralist, farmer and ethnicity which resulted in persistent conflicts. These elements have devastating effects on the socio-economic development, natural cohesion, peace and nation building in the region. The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine the tide of terrorism and the attendant effects in the region. Using qualitative research methods, the study explores the background of the multidimensional crisis and analyse the violent terrorist groups, communal conflicts, causes of the crisis, development crisis and measures implemented by various international organisations to stem the tide for nation building. Primary and secondary sources were utilised to provide deeper insights and support the analysis. The findings reveal that lack of democratic institution in the region is the major causes of the crisis measures and efforts to eradicate insecurity are significant processes in this study. The study concludes that multifaceted issues of insecurity, violent, terrorism and communal conflicts in the region are evidence that the implementation of democratic measures in the region has not yielded progress.

Keywords: Sahel region; violent extremism; Conflict; development; and democracy

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[1] Al-Hikmah University, Nigeria, Address: Adewole housing estate, Adeta Rd, Ilorin 240281, Kwara, Nigeria Ilorin, Kwara State. Nigeria, E-mail: mf.saka@alhikmah.edu.ng.

1. Introduction

The Sahel countries were colonised by the British, France, and Portugal with a promise of gaining independence on democratic process. The region was organised on democratic arrangement that inform leadership by transparent election. In this instance, the major challenge after the independence is the absence of civil-military relations which is the driving mechanism for protection of democracy. However, democracy as an institutional arrangement has not been transparent in the region due to internal and external challenges that place burden on the leadership performance (Soule, 2024). The Sahel states are divided along religious secularism, pastoralism, farmer and ethnicity which metamorphosed into conflict and insurgent groups. In this study, Sahel means a geographical region that consists the following countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Sudan and the southern parts of Algeria and Libya. The countries share a common ground on institutional arrangement. Part of the socio-economic and political burdens include instability, coup d etat, economic decay, terrorism, conflict, criminality, insecurity, drug trafficking, illegal migration and other forms of inhuman atrocities. In addition, the region is a diverse land with Upper West (Atlantic Ocean) and Upper East (Red Sea). The name Sahel is derived from the Arabic word Sahil, meaning the mixture of grassland, semi-aride and desert climate. It is commonly inhabited by farmers and pastoralists that largely partakes in various forms of farming (Conkar, 2020). Therefore, the people in the region depend on pastoralism as means of livelihood. Meaning that animal husbandry is the major farming profession as source of income. In view of this, there have been persistent clashes between the farmers and pastoralists on the rim land for the survival of their daily needs. The latter (pastoralists) migrate for grazing of their animals. While, the farmers (formal) have settled in order to produce the food they need to survive. Therefore, this form the basis of inter-communal conflicts, unsetting the require political crises since the attainment of independence.

In Africa, Sahel in different fashion, offers us varying degrees of conflict dynamism. In this scenario, Mali has witnessed consistent challenges that erode its central institution as an epicenter of conflict in the region. Violent conflict involving pastoralists and farmers and other related communal misunderstandings have triggered the complexity of the conflict. This results in ten and thousands of death across the Sahel region. This circumstance that compels the crisis, was frequent cross-border herders grazing their cattle for food and water in the desert vis-à-vis Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan etc. The herders maintain self-defense by carrying firearm before encroaching any environments that have leverage of

natural endowments within and outside the border (Akanji, 2019). Apart from the conflict, the Sahel region is surrounded by countries with less economic values. Therefore, poverty increases on daily basis, as government lacks good policy framework that could initiate socio-economic development.

Similarly, the region to a large extent have experienced coup d tat and counter coups and these acts frustrated the entire region. The adversity in democratic performance is rooted in the social, political and religious challenges. The reference of Mali in the region is closely linked to radical Islamic sects that claims hegemonic power. Demographically, Mali is a predominantly Muslim country that shares border with West and North African Muslim brotherhood countries (Boas, 2019). Not only this, the country is positioned at the central of the Sahel region and these altogether creates inconducive environment. There are several related Jihadist groups such as Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansarul Islam Group, both linked to Al-Qaeda Jihadist Group. Consequently, there are significant military activities in the region including self-proclaimed Islamic State and other non-state armed groups with prominent military activities operating in the desert. The unprecedented actions of the insurgent groups motivated the international organisations to carryout campaign movement for the peace process in the region. There have been proactive military campaign in the region organised by international organizations such as NATO and ECOWAS, to control the atrocities in the zone, (NATO & OTAN, 2022).

2. Statement of the Problem

The Sahel is placed on socio-economic, political and religious activities that stemmed from their history of colonialism. The attainment of political independence through democratic system was an achievement. However, there have been persistent conflicts that devastates the emerging states that are called Sahel-Sahara. The highest level of vulnerability was recorded in the region which work against humanities. The leadership in Sahel States is operating in line with autocratic system, which trivialised socio-economic policy after the attainment of independence. The policy framework is monolithic and the system benefits the government in power. In the region, the military cabals in the process of gaining power have collaborated with civilian counterparts to overthrow the democratic government. The recent military coups and counter coups in Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Chad altogether buttress this point. The persistent communal conflicts and contagious act of violent terrorism

in the region brings instability. In consequence, the region is devastated and falling apart due to failure to create nation states, as a set of ethnic group was declared sovereign state. In real sense, the Sahel is a lawless region that does not value human life because the central government is incapacitated to protect rights of the people. As a result, socio-economic development is trivialised due absence of democratic government. The pattern of socio-political activities in the Sahel states is absolutely against democratic principles. The assertion of scholars is that democracy as a system of government may not be successful due to pervasive political instability in the region. Therefore, there is the need to explore the socio-political activities of the region. So as to find out the root causes of its communal conflicts, on one hand, and also to foreground the operation of the violent extremist groups in the region, on the other hand.

3. Sahel Multidimensional Crisis

The Sahel states suffer from varying degrees of instability, resulting into the weak capacity of the state. The situation is that each state lacks institutional response to adequately address the livelihood confronting the entire population. However, the Sahel region consists countries that are located in the desert with less or no basic infrastructures that could take care of lives of the people. Naturally, persistence in climate change resulted in communal conflicts between the farmers and pastoralists on the control of land for farming (United Nations, 2018). The economic downturn in the region is a consequence of climate change, with irregular rain fall and prolong drought which affect production. Basically, the irregular rain fall resulted in low-flooding capacity of the River Niger, which reduces cultivation of land for agricultural production. This makes the farmers and pastoralists families vulnerable upon food security. The situation leads to death of animal husbandry, fishing, and other live stocks rearing as a result of climate change (Lancer, 2012). Hunger and starvation are commonly problems that hit the inhabitants. To compound the issue, the population is increasing on a daily basis, with statistics estimate of five children per woman. This situation metamorphosis into homelessness and alienation. The socio-milieu supports frequent migration or cross-border in which people of different nationals escape to developing countries such as Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraqi, and Kuwait in search for jobs. The risks being taken by the migrants to the aforementioned countries are staggering, as only few are successful, with larger percentage having to take up unprofessional jobs such as prostitution, house maid/servant, attendant, and security guards. The people that partake in the border-

crossing mostly are females who suffer rape and other harassments on their journey (Daewor, 2020).

4. Violent Terrorism Groups

Terrorism is a global issue after the September 11 attacks on the United States of America in 2011. The trending phenomenon is neither new nor exclusive to either developing or developed countries. This study looks specifically at the networks of violent extremism groups in Sahel region with specific emphasis on the connection of local, regional, national and global spaces. The study observes that the action of violent terrorist groups was an agenda from the international group notably Al-Qaida and Daesh, both insurgent groups, which have spread their activities, across the Sahel-Sahara since 2008. Their operations system in the Sahel region like Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Somalia, Niger, Sudan and many have made more members pledge their loyalty to the violent extremist groups. The network is linked across the Sahel region and any attempt to check them proved futile. Mali has become the epicenter of the violent extremism groups as it experienced several attacks with consequent increment in armed group.

In addition, the violent extremist groups has spread to north-central Mali and spilled over to Niger and Burkina Faso. Frequent operation of the insurgent groups in Mali during her process of democratisation was aborted by military coup in 2012 due to political instability and insecurity. This paved way for the signing of peace treaty in the state. Despite the successful signing, the violent extremist and terrorist groups that were not part of the peace talk continue to launch attacks in the country (United Nations, 2016). The spill over in Burkina Faso on violent extremism is another case in the Sahel region. There was a peace talk between the government authorities and insurgent groups but collapsed in 2021. The attacks were extended to North-West village of Solhan in 2021 which resulted in the death of 160 people among whom are children, ranging from 14 to 15 years of age. The Jihadist attacks were executed by the key violent terrorist groups such as Jamaat Nasrat al-Islam Wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In Somalia, Al-Shabaab emerged as a dominant radical armed group campaigning for an Islamic state in the region. The insurgent group has taken over the government in that country including the central power (Koller & Dele-Adedeji, 2023).
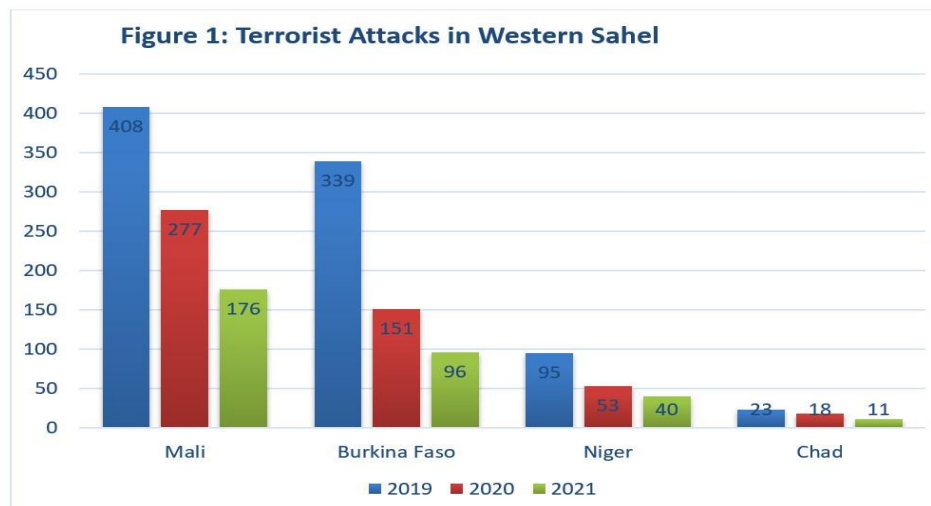
Figure 1. Terrorist Attacks in Western Sahel
Source: African Union, 2022

The table above presents subsequent reports of the violent extremism and terrorist groups in Western Sahel. The reflection on Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad in the region has become precarious world terrorist groups operating in different forms. However, the terrorist groups propagate the ideology of Islam working against the secular culture. The deadly terrorist groups have committed numerous atrocities against civilians, security forces and government officials in the aforementioned countries. The strongest groups in the region are JNIM and ISGS both which have formed a network parading in the desert. In the recent operation, tens and thousands of people are assassinated in various attacks by these groups. However, the return to democratic government in these countries did little to solve the socio-economic development. The world leaders have been wondering if democracy would be successful in the region. Mali, as a reference country, has recorded a high number of terrorist in 2019 with 408 attacks, 2020 277 attacks, and 2021 declined to 177 attacks. Other countries in the table such as Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad have equally recorded devastating attacks.

5. Communal Conflicts

The inherent conflict receives confrontation between the pastoralists and farmers competing for scarce resources. The pastoralists are nomadic farmers with cattle rearing migrating from one area to another in search of grazing land. The subsistence farmers engage in farming for the family and commercialisation purposes. Climate change plays its natural impact in the region, with less volume of water, rain fall, grasses, resulting in high temperature and drought. This pressure creates high competition and struggle among the herders and between the pastoralists and farmers which serves as the genesis of communal conflict (Sexuer, 2023). The conflicts are driven by the communal struggle for scarce natural resources such as land, water and forage, including some political and socio-economic factors. The major issue is how these scarce resources would be adequately distributed among the main actors who are to defend their respective interests.

Pastorates are the target victims and leading actors in the communal conflicts. Other actors that are engaged in the communal conflicts include fishermen, making the pastoralist's mobility difficult to control because they spill across the borders in the region. The largest pastoralists group are the Fulanis, a diverse population that is spread across Sahel. Mobility of the pastoralists and the use of firearms increased the communal conflicts. The farmer-herder conflict is a peculiar case in the rural areas that suffered insecurity and other related challenges such as ethnic violence, war, kidnapping and banditry. The proliferation of the firearms added to killing and further destruction of the already dilapidated infrastructures in the region. However, the central government lacks response capacity to address the issue due to weak authority (United Nations, 2022). Consequently, the attacks have not only devastated the environment, as socio-economic mechanisms have also been destroyed beyond repair.

6. Development

It has been mentioned from the outset in this study that communal conflicts and violent extremist groups have adverse impacts on the socio-economic development in the region. This is due to lack of democratisation of culture among political actors and stakeholders across the region. Democratisation of culture connotes behaviour that responds to adaptation of democracy through its principles. The rule defines procedural arrangements in leadership selection, when one party loses through election, another political party takes over the leadership (Huntington, 1991). The

factor that influences this trend is usually caused by tussle for power among political actors, violent terrorist groups or political ethnic groups to gain power against all odds and these impediments restrained developments across the region. Poverty and corruption are the major impediments after the post-third wave of democratisation as successive governments lack policy framework to check the epidemic. Developed countries like the United States of America, Britain and other democratic African countries are wondering about the future of region under the authoritarian democracies (UNDP, 2022). Regrettably, the region is undergoing a process of political decay, which undermines the new emerging democracies. In addition, within the post-third wave of democratisation, few Sahel countries recently witnessed reversal to authoritarian regimes through coup d'état, like the case of Burkina Faso 2015, Mali 2020, and Niger 2021. These coups were attempted against democratic government and is a lesson for other new democracies in Africa. However, the developing countries are lacking in basic infrastructures due to non-commitment of the central governments. In the real sense, most of the Sahel countries are poor to manage the limited resources in their domains. Therefore, lack of governance resulted in socio-economic and political struggle among the actors which accommodate crisis. Truly, economy decay compels the people to live on one dollar per day. In addition to this, the abject poverty confronts the lower class in the region. Conversely, the upper class has leverage in socio-economic and political opportunity to amass wealth and this defines them as big actors in the region (Conkar, 2020).

7. Causes of Crisis

Upon investigation, it is discovered that there is correlation between climate change and scarce resources, as source of conflict in both Niger and Burkina Faso, including other countries of the Sahel. However, in both countries, there are numerous conflicts that triggered to future climate stress. The conflict is fueled by continuous drought which resulted in people's mobility for their livelihood on limited natural resources. The burden on climate change forced the pastoralists to travel across and secure land on which their cattle can graze, particularly in the agricultural zone that is occupied by the farmers. Other challenges include drug, human trafficking, ethnic conflicts, and terrorism, grossly caused by bad governance in the region (NATO & OTAN, 2022). There is no proactive policy framework that could address the needs and security of the states. Rather, most of the countries have experienced coups and counter coups which devastated the central institutions. Therefore, there is no

sovereign government that can integrate diverse interests of ethnic groups to drive towards socio-economic development.

The cases of Somalia, Mali, and Burkina Faso are worrisome due to frequent ethnic cleavages. Mali is diverse in terms of ethnic-groups, namely: Bambara, Malinke, Soninke, Fulani, and Taureg, which is the minority among others (United Nations, 2018). The geographical position of Taureg in the North gives advantage in desert to operate at different levels for the protection of the environment against the encroachers. The Taureg, as minority group, has an encounter with the Malian army for secession but the situation was addressed with peaceful pact. In this stance, the issue of identity has a significant impact on the electoral participation and representation as both are the root causes of conflict across the region (Soule, 2024). On this ground, there are meeting and departing areas in their socio-economic and political activities. First, the countries are similar with political crisis which challenge democratic system. Second, the political crises are in varying degrees but the coups and counter coups have ravaged the socio-economic development. Third, there have been frequent transnational conflicts operating in different dimensions. Mauritanian as an Islamic country maintains hegemonic power and therefore, conceived as the terrorist ridden zone.

8. Resolution Mechanism

This section studies the mechanisms and measures adopted by the international and regional organisations in the campaign for security process across Sahel region. Human rights approach was instrumental in defending the threat through lawful means. Proactive initiatives have been adopted by the African Union, ECOWAS, G5Sahel, European Union, United States, and France to restore security, social and political order across the region. The overwhelming efforts have caused a difficult task on campaign towards the peace process in the region. Notwithstanding, there have been regularly deployed number of troops to serve in the security and peace keeping mission to ameliorate the conflicts (Umar, 2022). The AU strategic mission for the Sahel region seeks to improve on active political representation, provision of security apparatus, and socio-economic development. The multidimensional approach to address the vulnerabilities of the region crisis is acknowledged by fifteen (15) other countries with plans advanced by regional and international actors working to mitigate this crisis.

In addition, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has a 15 member regional groups with a mission to protect and stabilise the regional economic integration. This facilitates robust economic co-existence with the hope of promoting free trade among the member states. The effort of the regional groups has also intervened in crisis that had threatened Liberia, Sierra Leon, and Congo through the ECOMONG. In this sense, the G5 Sahel, as one of the less developed regions, is to combat extreme poverty, food crises, poor governance, crime, corruption, as well as terrorism (Koundy, 2022). In the campaign, the European Union has engaged a proactive effort in the Sahel through the EU External Action Service (EEAS) to address the long term challenges faced by the region, starting from 2011. The September 11, 2011 attacks on the United States was a paradigm shift in international politics. The terrorist attacks compelled the US to introduce a range of security apparatus for monitoring and block Al-Qaeda networks across the region. Part of the security apparatus includes surveillance programmes, security cooperation networks as well as intelligence and logistical support for US allies and partners in the region. Proactive technical improvement promotes the launching of drone operation in Niamey Niger capital in order to watch the movement of the terrorists in the region (Soule, 2024).

The United Nations came up with a new agenda on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for developing countries to protect humanities on the basic infrastructures in 2000. These mechanisms reflected upon the Sahel countries but failed due to prolong crises in the region. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was a socio-economic tool that replaced the MDGs in 2015 with target of humanity which also touches Sahel States (Saka, 2024). Consequently, the tide of terrorism or conflict and lack of policy framework of the government in power are responsible for failure of the MDGs in the Sahel region.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sahel region has witnessed inconclusive crisis due to socio-economic, political, and religious struggle among the contending actors. The actors and the stakeholders have not taken democratic order to stabilise under democratic system. Rather, political power is a means to protect the interest of their members at the detriment of others. The region is paraded by antagonist class among the cleavages to address political development which resulted in economy decay. The frequent coup and counter coups are trending issues that frustrate the region. Part of

the antagonist class reflects the operation of the violent extremist groups which carry out consistent attacks in the region. The communal conflict among the pastoralists and farmers on access to limited resources was a result of lack of institutional capacity to address the issues. The national security apparatus lacks proactive measures and right mechanisms by the central government. Therefore, the persistent political instability in Mali compelled the Taureg tribe in the North for political succession. Consequently, the international, national and regional organisations have deplored measures that would promotes peace in the region. The Sahel countries have not settled to embrace democratic government as the order of governance and method of selecting leadership.

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