

## Pro-Government Militias in Counterinsurgency in Northeast Nigeria: Roles and Operational Challenges

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### **Abstract:**

The intensification of the insurgent hostilities of the Islamic fundamentalist in northeast Nigeria since 2009 have witnessed the deliberate mobilization of community based militia groups in the counterinsurgency operation. The militia that are in support of the government and the security agencies were largely armed with mundane weapons but yet lacks technical training of armed warfare and military combat of confronting the highly equipped rivals. However, since their participation, they allegedly succeeded to reduce both attack frequencies and fatalities from both the public and state security sides. Identifying with successes, most communities in the northeast pointed out the militias as indefatigable warriors. This study therefore investigated through qualitative case approach the roles and the operational challenges of the militias in the counterinsurgency operation. The qualitative data was collected through in-depth face to face interview with key informants involving both community members, the militia participants and local authorities in the northeast. The study confirmed the incredible roles of the militia in the combat operation. Equipped with their terrain knowledge of physical and topographic structure of the northeast coupled with their vital human intelligence function such as personal knowledge of the insurgent fighters, collaborators and local supply routes, they successfully the counter the insurgent rebellion. Others are the financial and insurance issues, shelter and training among the challenges bedeviling the militia operation.

**Keyword:** *pro-government militia, insurgency, counterinsurgency, security challenges*

## **Introduction**

Since the year 2013, arising from the aggravation of the insurgent hostilities in northeast Nigeria, the region has witnessed an unprecedented participation of pro-government militias in the counterinsurgency operation to support the state security apparatus. Evidences suggest the involvement of militias have incredibly changed the counterinsurgency narrative of the formal security apparatus resulting in substantial degradation of the insurgency violence. The resulting effect have manifested in reduction of both attack frequency and mortality rate. Since its eruption in 2009, Boko Haram combined with aggressive state counterinsurgency was allegedly responsible for brutal murder of over 40,000 people and displacement of over five million people within and outside Nigeria. Indices by United Nation Humanitarian Agency revealed the displacement of nearly 3million people in Niger, 150 thousand to Cameroun as refugees. Many have argued the indices many be somehow conservative as thousands of others are virtually unaccounted as many are hosted by their families, friends and relative outside the government designated camps. Much worrisome is the fact that the displace population are hosted by countries enlisted among the world's impoverished societies.

Boko Haram reputes all counterinsurgency measures by the state. Government measures in combating the Boko Haram incorporate both military and political options. The military option is primarily kinetic that involve the violent arrest, killing and destruction of the insurgent fighters, dens and their supporters. The idea was rooted from the assumptions of enemy-centric counterinsurgency theory that prophesize the use of force in dealing with insurgents and collaborators. The political approach is non-kinetic involving the application of soft approach to entice the insurgents' withdrawal, discourage

recruitment, and with withdraw the population support toward it cause. The strategy is rooted from the Popular nineteenth century counterinsurgency scholar David Galula, who claim that the best way to combat an insurgent is to withdraw the support of the population from its action. Galula's strategy is also born out of from the ideas of ancient Chinese strategist Su Tzu who equated the insurgent to a fish and the counterinsurgent to a river. He claimed that much as how a fish is forced to a miserable when the river is drained out of it, the insurgent is equally forced to die when the population in which it hibernates its perpetuate its violence was withdrawn of it.

In most respect, Boko Haram defied both the military and the political measures of the government in pursuit of its violence. In addition to the brutal murders of innocent lives, incessant destruction of public and private properties, between 2009 to 2014, the insurgents' have reportedly conquered numerous towns and villages and establish its authorities over the population. Onuaha (2014) indicated that about 24 local councils have fallen into the militia group in the northeast states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. The hotbeds of the insurgent hostilities. Many reports that equated the land mass seize and occupied by the insurgent to that of Belgium.

The only subsidence to the hostilities of the insurgents was observed with the participation of the pro-government militias in the counterinsurgency operation. Literature on the drivers of the militia involvement are diverse and conflictual. Whereas some argued the participation of the group in the counterinsurgency is voluntary, others indicated that it was triggered and sponsored by the state. In either case, the reports indicated that the engagement of the pro-government militias have significantly subsided the insurgent rebellion. The reduction has manifested both in respect to

attack frequencies and fatalities rate. Equipped with the technical knowledge of the physical terrain, socio-cultural ties and familiarities with the host population and most importantly personal knowledge of the insurgent fighters and collaborators, the pro-government militias have been incredible in weakening the Boko Haram hostilities. Besides serving as vital intelligentsia to the regular security apparatus, and a guide to the military in organizing attacks on the militia dens, the pro-government militias has provided connections of the local population with the state security operatives.

Nevertheless, in spite of the acclaimed successes, concerns are enormous on internal operations of the militia group. Sterneth Et.al have indicated that pro-government militias can stand to undermined state sovereignty. Others have also indicated the propensity of looting and stamping of state laws (Nitzschke & Studdard, 2005). have equally pointed that unrestricted access to light weapons can aggravate conflict situations and risk the reoccurrence of further conflict (Klare, 1999). This article however addressed internal administration crisis in the militia organisation. The importance beside the contribution to the scholarship, it would serve as an incredible policy guides for state authorities in Nigeria and other countries facing similar insurgent and pro-government militia violence in their territories. In addressing its key issues, the paper proceeded in four sections. The first section explained the methodological approach of the study, the second section is the conceptual clarification on the pro-government militia, the third section is the presentation of the challenges of the pro-government militias, and the final section is the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study designed on a case approach. The case study was conducted at

Geidam town in Yobe state, Nigeria. The selection of the case was purposive because Yobe State and Geidam town in particular is one of the communities worse affected by the insurgent hostilities in northeast Nigeria. The empirical data was collected through in-depth interview with key informants. Thirteen informants were engaged selected from three cluster of population involving members of the pro-government militias, community leaders and state/government officials concern about security matters. Some selections were purposive and others through snowball process. In either, the participants are chosen based on their familiarities of the pro-government militias and their operation as well as their willingness to participate in the study. Nine interviews were conducted through face to face interaction, whereas four were conducted through telephone medium. The venue and times of each interview was either suggested or selected by the informant. On the average, each interview lasted for about one hour mostly terminated on the perceived saturation of data by the respondent. The analysis of the data was done through thematic approach. The preceding subsection explained the main themes of the study.

## **Literature Review**

The literature on the theoretical meaning of what pro-government militias entails remained confusing. The complicity rest not only in finding a universal definition of the phenomenon, but it is also on the determination of kind of groups that would comprise the conceptual boundary. It is also not only on its abstract philosophical thought, but also on its literal and practical connotation. For instance, Sarbine et.al (2013) define a pro-government militia as an armed group that is sponsored by the government (national or sub-national) but not being part of the regular security forces but has some level of organization undertaking security functions in all or some parts of the state. Bohmelt Et.al (2017)

defined pro-government militias as an 'armed groups somewhat aligned with the state to perform specific security roles, but they are not part of the regular (i.e., army, navy, and air force) military's command-and-control chain.' Schubert categorised pro-government militias into two broad categories of community base armed group (CBAG) and Non-state armed group (NSAG). Although, in principle the two appears different whereas both share common characteristic as a kind of irregular armed carrying institution that was not duly establish by the extant law of the state, but are supporting the state to execute its violence and promote and maintain law and order. Where the two shares common denominators, however, CBAGs as a subtype of the broader category of non-state armed groups (NSAGs).

Arising from these complexities, providing a definite definition remained an issue of philosophical contest. The realism of this is evident with the revision of the concept by the world notable and revered Pro-Government Militia (PGM) data. In its earlier version, the PGM data set defines a pro-government militia government (national or subnational) sponsored security movement but not being part of the regular security forces armed and has some level of organization' (Carey et al., 2013: 250). Although, whereas this definition has been the citation for most researchers over the years, its however alleged with certain loopholes. Most of the shortfalls observed on the deficiencies of the determination of critical inclusive boundaries of the group. Arising from these defects, the PGM Data revised the earlier definition to includes a wide range of new variables describing the characteristics, behaviour, life cycle and organization of the concept pro-government militias across the globe. Besides expansion of the boundaries, it answers a wide range of questions that can be investigated on a global scale, including questions about the formation of the group, the life cycle, recruitment and

treatment of militia members and the violence used by these groups (Carel et.al, 2022).

In spite of its widespread condemnation and purported criminalization of its operations by the world anti-criminal and war agencies, the emergence and operations of pro-government militias have continued to feature in most recent uprisings around the globe. The reality of these recently was observed in the political upheavals in Libya, Bahrain, and Syria, Nigeria etc. Whereas the operationalities of the group are virtually similar, but the circumstance and motives triggering their formations differs accordingly. Sometimes community groups organised themselves to protect against thieveries as exemplified in Peru during the 1970s as peasant communities formed self-defence groups initially to protect themselves against cattle thieves. Others are the formation of rondas campesinas to defend against the Maoist insurgency in Peru. The Ronda's have received the support from the government mostly in the form of weapons and logistics. In Iraq, the pro-government Awakening Militias were born out of a struggle between rival militias. Alliance with the government and US forces gave access to arms. India in 2005 also formed or supported the Salwa Judum, a village militia to fight Maoist insurgency in the country. Partly attributed to their relative successes, the Salwa Judum was afforded the status of Special Police Officer in the country. Moreover, the US military encouraged Sunni group to fight insurgents in Iraq between 2005 and 2008 (Clayton & Thomson, 2014).

Whether it is a state sponsored or self-recruited, one of the cardinal feature of pro-government militia is that it enjoys supportive functions from the government. Sterneth et.al (2018) indicates that the support enjoyed by pro-government militias makes them less likely to be hold accountable for their violence and other illegal

behavior. Carey & Mitchell (2016) shows governments often turn a blind eye to pro-government militias roles on human right abuses. In most instances, state supported pro-government militias often tend to prolong the duration violence and obstacle any effort that may led the termination of the conflict. They sometimes deliberately frustrate all effort that may promote peace deal and negotiations. To prolonged the conflict situation and ensure control of the population, pro-government militias operate with impunity. Using Salwa Judum in India as an example, Carell and Mitchell indicated pro-government militias often act with impunity because impunity serve as an incentive for violent collective to flourish.

In most respect, pro-government militias have been a focus of many intra state conflict in recent years. Whereas research has been growing particularly in areas of the militia successes, motivations and operations, little attention was offered to the understanding of the internal management and challenges bedevilling the militia administration. The following subsection focused on the analysis of the challenges of the pro-government militias in northeast Nigeria.

### **Challenges of Pro-Government Militias In Nigeria**

The analysis of the data showed ineffective organizational structuring; improper coordination and factors of external interference in recruitment are among the challenges hindering the combating activities of pro-government militia. Interview data show that the majority of pro-government militia participants are not satisfied with the existing organizational structure of the group.

#### **1. Centralization of the Administration**

Moreover, informants expressed dissatisfaction about the centralization of the administrative activities of the pro-government militia.

Informants demonstrated dissatisfaction that only a few people are controlling the entire activities of the pro-government militia group. Reflecting on this contention, informant A1 revealed;

Few people are single handily running the affairs of this group. They twist the activities of the group to their wishes and decide on the destiny of every participant. Since they are responsible for enlisting people to benefit in anything, they select whom they like. This is why you will wonder why some people are included in two or benefits, while others have not to benefit anything in the past.

Informant A3 also supported;

There is a need to expand the command system. Presently, it is only a few, or only three people are responsible for the whole management. This restrictive administrative system has caused dissension among many young participants in the group.

Importantly, observations during the fieldwork also confirmed that the pro-government militia group operates three level hierarchies comprising; the commander, deputy commander and patrol commander. The three people virtually exercise the entire administrative and commanding work of the group. There is virtually no stringent regimentation in the structuring of the group as applicable in the conventional securities. In fact, for factors largely attributed to the non-regimentation of the structure, there are apparent cases of non-compliance to commands

of superior officers. The resultant effect, therefore, induces gross abuses into the group.

The apparent case of noncompliance to the superior commanders was observed on one occasion during the fieldwork;

A man complains to the pro-government militia commander that armed men suspected to be Boko Haram have snatched his ox-bulls. The commander, therefore, calls the military commander and informs him of the situation, who then order to refer the man to him for investigation. However, as the commander requests the young pro-government militia around him to escort the man, however, the young boy responded that I am not going to military camp by now (Field note, 16 March 2018).

The above response strongly confirmed to the non-compliance attitude of some of the pro-government militia members to their superior officers. Elaborating on how this attitude affected the group, informant A6 lamented that it has undermined the internal coordination of the group. Majority of the members are not subordinating to the group leaders. The simple reason according to the participant is that they could not punish for violation. Informant A4 lamented that;

Some members are arrogant nowadays because they deliberately tend to violate the standing orders because they know someone can stand for them outside. Nobody can be able to call them to order even the

commander. However, this is a recent case because it not like this before, it is showing a very bad signal for the group especially from the people outside the community (Informant A4).

In fact, there is a general belief that such altitude has culminated into several cases of abuse and gross misconduct by many of the pro-government militia members. The consequence of militia disobedience to the security of a state has been documented in many societies.

Furthermore, some informants' pointed lack of training as other challenges of the group. Majority of the informants indicated pro-government militia has not undertaken any combating training. This lack of training according to informant A3 has pushes the group to some avoidable risks.

They are lacking training on how to combat the group. It is just the spirit of braveness influence them to chase the Boko Haram, but regarding training be rest assured that very few actually know how to handle a weapon. To best of my knowledge, since the mobilization, I have not seen nor heard of any combating training to these boys.

Subsequently, observation during the fieldwork also confirmed to the poor combating training of the pro-government militia group. The research observed in one instance;

Collaborative team of the pro-government militia and military are patrolling in the town and



they found people running in the different direction, whereas the military jump out of their vehicles and took cover trees and building around, the pro-government militia proceeded to the scene undistracted (Field note, 23 April 2018).

## **2. Shelter/Accommodation Issues**

In addition to the remuneration issues, finding shows there is poor shelter condition for the pro-government militia participants. Congested accommodation accompanies with the unhygienic living condition has been a challenge to the groups' operation. Interview data alongside the observational notes confirmed to the dilapidated conditions of the pro-government militia members living environments. Reflecting on the shelter situations, informant A1 asserted;

We have a serious challenge with accommodation. The only place we have is this small house allocated to us by the local authority. It is our office, and it is our house. There are only four rooms in it. Therefore, in comparison the growing population you can understand that the space would not be sufficient anymore.

Collaborating on the above assertion, informant A8 revealed;

Many of us are sleeping outside even during the winter. It is actually a communal sacrifice, however, looking at the nature of the work and the changing weather condition we need a place to sleep after duty. The

lacking of this shelter may expose participants to so many risks

Moreover, the informants in the other categories note the narration of the accommodation challenges of the pro-government militia. Informant A11 for instance revealed;

Actually, they have an accommodation issue. The place they are accommodating is too small, and they cannot rent in the town because of the unforeseen. Many of vacated their house with their families to build the thatch houses in the campsite to stay.

In fact, observation during the fieldwork also confirmed to the shredded shelter situation of the participants. The campsite circled with a dipped trenched has in it the white painted house comprising of four rooms and a living room. In each room, there are mats, bed sheets and pillows are scattered in every angle. Out of the camp, there is a number of thatch houses accommodated by the spouse and children of some of the participants of the pro-government militia.

Importantly, Von Clausewitz; the classical war strategist expanded the virtues of moral factors on the success of the war. The expert argued that the qualities of combatant morale influence the success or losses in the battlefield. Qualitative motivation can enhance the quality of the commander commandment, increases courageousness and improves subordinate patriotism and insubordination to superiors. More so, Italian war veteran Napoleon shows that heighten morale among troops is three times more worthy than the provision of physical

military equipment. Fields (2014) corroborating with Baynes refer to morale as the single most important determinant of the battle success.

### **3. External Interference**

Finding shows that there is consistent interference of outsiders into the groups' activities. Most of the interference according to the informants was from the local authority. The manifestation of this according to the informants was largely in the areas of recruitment the recruitment of new members and determination of remuneration package for the participants. There is a lack of guiding principle and criteria for selecting, recruiting, and penalizing combatants. These actions have detestable consequences on the group's performance. Revealing in this contention, informant C2 explained:

There is not a strong internal mechanism controlling the behavior of the participants. Because of the lack of strong guideline of screening who is who in the group, many bad eggs are co-opted and presently nobody is exercising control over them.

Moreover, attributed to the factors of external interference, participants that likely violate the standing orders of the group are rarely punish. Observation during the fieldwork revealed that there are three punishment strategies used by pro-government militia; warning, suspension, and dismissal. However, such strategies according to informant A6 are rarely executes on the participants.

Dismissal is very rare. Many offenses are requiring participants

dismissed, but it is rarely executed. In my knowledge of the history of the group, it is only on five occasions that people dismissed in the pro-government militia group. However, do not be a surprise to hear that all of them have re-joined the group presently (Informant A6).

Collaborating on the above contention, informant A4 argued

Some people have an upper hand in the group. They often violate standing orders but nobody can talk to them. It is in very rare cases that people are to order. In fact, most of those people that are opted for penalties are the most hardworking of the participants. Nepotism has created serious resentment among the active members of the militia.

Moreover, investigation on the offense requiring the dismissal shows connivance with criminal groups and burglaries pointed by most of the respondents. Observation during the fieldwork and interactions with local populations shows that the entire process involving the recruitment of people into the pro-government militia is marred with several cases of abuse.

There are also accusations of serious cases of nepotism because officials from the local authority deliberately shortlist people into the pro-government militia in recent time. One community based civil group leader opined that most those people recruited in recent time are family members, relatives, and friends of local government officials. Informant C3 also confirmed to this assertion:



Gradually the system is largely abused recently. In the beginning, the participation is mainly on communal interest, money and any other benefit are secondary. However, when stipend was started giving to the participants, the financiers (government authorities) started shortlisting their relatives into the group. This has honestly abused the practices (Informant C3).

This recruitment is rarely in communal interest but driven by certain interests. Therefore, the lack of a standard recruitment process seriously challenged the combating activities of the pro-government militia. There are visible discontent and anger on the activities of some members of the pro-government militia group by the population. These behaviors of the pro-government militia contradicted Bateson (2017) that shows perceptions of 'overall justice' within an organization determine the successes and prosperity of the organization. However, due to the intricate organizational challenges of the pro-government militia, such positive perceptions were undoubtedly lacking among many participants of the pro-government militia.

Importantly, the organizational challenge of pro-government militia concurred Chukwuma (2017) that lamented the ineffective organizational structure of the pro-government militia group. The author shows the existing structure of the group is not encompassing. The group lacks standing conduct of code that guides the group's activities. The author hence lamented very loose organizational structure and leadership vacuum brew coordination and efficiency issues in the pro-government militia group. Perhaps, the coordination challenge is consistent with the assertion of the United States Army and the Marine Corps Field Manual (2006). The field

manual proposed that unless there is coordination, the insurgent would exploit the opportunities to obtain the support of the local population hence extends its violence. The manual argues the simplest approach to defeat insurgent is to ensure coordination among the counterinsurgent group.

## **Conclusion**

In most instance, the article revealed that the involvement of militia into the counterinsurgency operation have influenced the reduction of the insurgent hostilities in northeast Nigeria. The reasons for the co-option of the pro-government militia should be helpful for promoting securities, however, the study argued that militias are often co-opted when state security machinery is weak and state authorities used militias as proxies to pacify key areas of the country security architecture. Whereas this practice has been found helpful in many countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Central Africa Republic, its consequence is pronounced on the fact that the co-option of the militias has contravened the Marx Weber's theory of statehood that claimed state as the only legitimate authority to possesses the monopoly of physical violence within its territory. However, as a panacea, the study argued their regulatory mechanism on the militias must be strong by not limited to the traditional practices reprimand such as warning, suspension, and dismissal, but should also encapsulate other techniques training and ethical orientation on the discharge of their security functions. The thesis contends that though civil population should be made part of the main scheme of the countering securities in their domain through the partial conventional approach, however, strict regulatory mechanism should be established to checkmate the excessiveness of the groups' violence. To ensure this, the following recommendations were offered.

1. As a matter of urgency, there is a need for an extensive strategic capacity building for the members of pro-government militia. This process requires providing technical combating skills to the members of the pro-government militia in such areas of arms handling and operations, counterbalance and counter defense tactics.
2. This thesis suggests that incorporating the pro-government militia participants' as security actors are essential for the post-conflict peace-building and reconstruction, but caution must be taken on the process of adopting the group. In fact, since there are numerous symptoms that the group may probably erupt to challenge the extant law of the state, there is a need to offer an extensive de-radicalization program and skills about the execution of the civic duties. This process requires offering course fully manage by formal academic institutions of learning.
3. There is a need for an extensive retraining and retraining of Nigeria security force on counterinsurgency warfare. Perhaps, rather than engaging on the conventional tactics that were deeply hated by the local populations, a prerequisite skill for ensuring effective counterinsurgency campaign should be incorporated into security training manuals.
4. There is a need to ensure pro-government militia operate in a manner that promotes stability. To be effective, the local, state and the federal governments need to establish tight control mechanisms

capable of preventing the militia from challenging the state autonomy in the long-run, while abating undue abuses of human rights and liberties. In this respect, the pro-government militia must be compelled to operate within the confines of the extant law and the activities be properly monitored and regulates through established legal and institutional codes. Doing this should have implications on forestalling operational impunity. In this respect, in addition to the state government, the Federal Government of Nigeria should be involved through coherent policy-cum-institutional measures to harness the potentialities of the pro-government militia in community policing system in the country.

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