JOURNAL OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 2, Issue 2, No. 1 / June 2024
https://www.jopd.com.ng

THE MIDDLE BELT OF NIGERIA: ESTRANGEMENT AND CONTROVERSIES

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Abstract
This paper explores the controversies and estrangement in the Middle Belt of Nigeria which has for long in Nigeria's history been embroiled in controversy, violence and estrangement. The study used the qualitative (non-statistical) method of data collection and analysis; collected and used data from secondary sources (journal articles, books, public records, archive materials) and historical documentation method for the purpose of its analysis. The Middle Belt is embroiled in both wide and deep controversy in the process of pursuing its estrangement, dissidence and resentment to the larger North; it would be most difficult for the Middle Belt to achieve such because of incoherence and multiplicity of the groups, lack of popular, comprehensive and sustainable future plan and the inherent intra-ethnic acrimonies. There is paucity of studies on the inherent controversy in the Middle Belt's pursuit of separate identity and geography from the general and Northern Nigeria. This paper addresses the critical issues of use of peace and violence in the struggle, manipulation by the elites and notable events and periods in the estrangement and controversy. The paper recommends provision of adequate social services and amenities in the region, regulating the activities of ethno-religious and regional groups, strict control of small arms among the civil society.

Keywords: Estrangement and controversy**,** ethnicity and religion, Middle-Belt, Nigeria, Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

For almost all nations, states and or societies, there may be at one time or the other in their gradual evolution, growth and development or journey to nationhood, geographical areas or parts which may be controversial and or estranged due to ethno-religious, geo-political and or socio-economic issues and perspectives. Such areas include the Kashmir in India; Southern Sudan in the former Sudan; Ambazonia in Cameroon; Kurdistan in Iraq; and Ireland in Britain among others (Momin, 2004; Scheuer, 2004). Each of such areas has unique features and characters which make it both controversial, significant and estranged to the existence and sustenance of the respective state and or the nation. However, such characters assume more unique and or complex dimensions in heterogeneous states or nations such as Nigeria where the Middle Belt also known as the 'Central Nigeria' has for long been a controversial feature in Nigeria's political, ethno-religious and geo-regional and political affairs (Mohammed, Abdullahi & Ameer, 2024; Mohammed, 2018a; Suleman, 2015; Mohammed, 2018b). The culmination of these have given the Middle Belt of Nigeria both the unique features and turbulent political, ethno-religious and geo-regional trends throughout the history of Nigeria's journey to nationhood. In that respect, Ochonu (2008:97) notes that it was the inconsistent British colonial determination to establish and maintain a homogeneous entity in the Northern Region of Nigeria being the largest region that resulted in the political, ethno-religious situations and conflicts in the Middle Belt area.

Generally, Nigerian politics is significantly influenced by geo-ethnic, ethno-religious and or the 'Christian/Muslim' divide (Ibrahim 2000:54), thereby undermining the progress, unity and development of the Nigerian state. This influence has largely been shaped by the elites, and politicians who are mostly bent on manipulating avenues of ethnicity, religion and or geo-regionalism in achieving their interests of accessing and consolidating hold onto the state power and resources (Ball & Peters, 2005; Levi & Stoker 2000). The Middle Belt struggles has been described by one of its architects Patrick Dokotri (as cited in Clark 1991:205, 527) as 'an article of faith which no power on earth could stop'. However, unlike the struggles of the oil rich Niger Delta people which is largely hinged on resource control and environmental issues among others that of the Middle Belt has to do with manipulation of ethnicity, religion and politics in the quest for separate identity within the Northern Region of Nigeria (Othman, Osman & Mohammed, 2021; 2019:90).

This article examines the controversy and estrangement in terms of political-economy, geography, ethnicity and religion in the Middle Belt area within the spheres of the Northern and Nigerian entity. The study is premised on the dissident and estranged agitation and tendencies for separate geo-religious, ethnic and political identities characterising the area vis-à-vis the larger Northern Nigerian entity.

Background, History and Controversy over the Middle Belt of Nigeria

The entity/state now referred to as Nigeria was not in any singular composition of people and or areas/communities bound by the same or common political, economic and or religious entity until the British colonial amalgamation of the areas on 1 January 1914 (Mohammed, Aisha and Saidu, 2018). The British actually brought the peoples and areas into one welded entity 'Nigeria' without the consent of the peoples who heterogeneously constituted the newly formed Nigeria (Mohammed, Abdullahi & Ameer, 2024; Othman, et al., 2019:82; Akindola & Ehinomen, 2017; Mohammed, 2018b). Empires, Kingdoms, acephalous societies, Caliphates and Emirates among others represented the socio-political, economic and ethno-religious settings of the various areas and peoples before the January 1914 formation of the Nigerian entity. As the British welded the areas into one entity, it also established and consolidated colonial rule which spanned the areas for about 99 years (1861-1960) before finally granting independence in October 1960. Among the major areas that formed Nigeria was the North of the Niger (later the Protectorate of the North of the Niger; the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria). This area comprised of the largest and single political unit (the Central Sudan/Sokoto Caliphate) in Africa before the colonial conquest and occupation (Paden 1986:313), and it (Sokoto Caliphate) was established in 1804 based on the principles and ideals of an Islamic state. However, the 1903 defeat of Sultan Attahiru I by the British colonial forces marked a new beginning in the history of the area. Prior to that, the Caliphate had its headquarters in Sokoto and Gwandu for the East and Western Emirates (Mohammed, 2018a:23). The various Emirates under the then Sokoto Caliphate comprised of Bauchi, Adamawa, Zaria, Kano, Katsina among others.

The area now known as the Middle Belt (part of the Northern Nigeria) was then largely composed of the acephalous societies who also resisted conversion to Islam during the reign of the Sokoto Caliphate and some of them were even in hostilities with the Caliphate (Ochonu, 2008). Similarly, for many of the peoples of the area as observed by Klein (2001:55) 'the problem was that to the degree that they were successful and population grew, they had to move down from the hills. The plains were empty, but often fertile'. While those peoples were up the hills and then moving down, the Hausa/Fulani Muslims who were traders, artisans, and Islamic religious propagators had traversed the plains and the established settlements, trade routes and towns such as Zangon Kataf, Tafawa Balewa, some parts of Igala land, Auchi, Jos, and Benue area among others (Mustapha, 2000:90; Shentong, 1986; Farringtong, 1963; Hogben and Greene, 1966; Clark, 1991; Paden, 1986; Yusufu,

2017). Thus Ochonu (2008:105) notes that "The Sokoto Caliphate occupied the upper perch of an emerging socio-political evolutionary ladder, with the Tiv and others like them at the bottom".

In that vein, Ochonu (2008:95-96) observes that 'the most notable site of this colonial policy was the Middle Belt, which, while possessing the desired ethnic difference, lacked the centralized political and cultural institutions and symbols of the Emirate system, deemed crucial to Indirect Rule'. Precisely, many of the popular towns in the Middle Belt were either established and or developed by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims from the Caliphates and the Emirates in the process of trading and or spread of Islamic religion. Thus, the names of many of such towns bear the Hausa/Fulani Muslims names. While the Hausa/Fulani Muslims were engaged in trade and artisans with those Middle Belt peoples who moved down and again up the hills, the inhabitants mainly resisted Islam and that explains their continuous resistance to Islam today (Mohammed, Othman & Osman, 2019). They also resented the Northern Emirate system which they perceived as dominant and hegemonic, and bent on imposing Islamic religion and culture on them. The advent of Colonialism opened another chapter as the colonialists in the Northern region found that the Hausa/Fulani Muslims under the Sokoto Caliphate and Emirates had the most advanced socio-political, economic and religious structures and settings among those in the occupied areas. Hence, the colonialist used the Hausa/Fulani traditional system and hierarchy (Indirect Rule) in ruling the Northern Region which made them (colonialists) to also use the Hausa/Fulani people to rule many of the areas in the Middle Belt (Ochonu, 2008; Yusufu, 2017).

There were however, both stiff resistance and resentment from the Middle Belt people as they considered the colonialists and the Hausa/Fulani feudal structures as collaborators in imposing hegemony over them. The history and background of the Middle Belt and the Hausa/Fulani Muslims dominant North is thus characterized and dominated by over-arching narratives of genocide, pogrom, annihilation and oppression by the 'feudalistic and religious zealots' among others (John, 2018:12; Mohammed & Aisha, 2018:73 & 104). There are also those of slave raiding which Klein (2001:50) refute and instead, Mason (1969), and Gleave and Prothero (1971) maintain that originally, the Middle Belt had lower population than the other areas of the North and South around it. Up to the present moment, the narratives of hegemonic rule against the Middle Belt people, resistance and resentment and what many believe as 'pathological hatred' exists between the dominant Hausa/Fulani Muslims on one hand, and the Middle Belt and mainly non-Muslims. There also occurs resistance and resentment to the traditional/Emirate/religious set up of the North from all angles, including literature, historiography, social relations (Suleman, 2012; Turaki, 1993; Kukah, 1993; Ochonu, 2008; Mohammed, 2018a; Mohammed & Aisha, 2018; Suleman, 2015). Therefore, the Middle Belt signifies a forceful identity in the Nigerian political atmosphere which is mainly used as a tool for rallying, conscientisation and mobilisation against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims of the North (Suleman, 2012:20).

What has made the situation of the Middle Belt more precarious was as Ayoade (1973:63) notes that 'the country (Nigeria) was divided along the lines of the two dynamic and proselytizing religions-Islam in the North (excluding the Middle Belt) and Christianity in the South (including the Middle Belt)'.

In 1949, some Christians from the so-called Middle Belt launched an organisation – the Northern Nigeria Non-Muslims League (NNNML) with the objective of establishing firm resistance to the activities of the Northern Regional Government which they perceived to be dominated by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims majority although that has been refuted by several studies and records (Mohammed, 2018a:40-45; Paden, 1986:329-355; 413-414). The name (NNNML) was however, shortly changed to the Middle Zone League (MZL) in order to assert and emphasise its determination to resistance and separation from the general North (Suleman, 2015:16).

The resistance, dissent and resentment by the Middle Belt people has over the years especially from 1949 to date been consistent, while conflict and violence has remained recurring. However, such are carried out dynamically and using different and various means as peaceful and violent – politics and political parties, including alliances with the Northern regional and Southern political parties (Mohammed, 2018a:119, 123, 124, 126; Clark, 1991:664, 747, 785; Mohammed, 2018b:11); the media and religious institutions, especially the Churches; resistance to inclusion of Sharia Penal Code in the 1979, 1989 and 1999 constitutions and implementation of same (Othman, et al., 2019:91-92). For the violent parts of the resistance, dissent and resentment, it started with the Tiv riots in 1964 (Turaki, 1993:125); the ethno-religious conflicts in the area, especially Kaduna which became recurring since 1980s; the indigene-settler conflicts in Kaduna, Jos, Tafawa Balewa, and Taraba among others; and in the recent, from 2014-2018, the orchestrated and conspired Fulani/herdsmen and farmers conflict which indirectly resulted in tactical collaboration between some of the Middle Belt ethno-religious and political elites and some others from Southern Nigeria to among others ban open grazing/night and tacitly exclude the Fulanis from socio-economic operations, political affairs and drive them away from the Middle Belt and Southern Nigeria, and cripple their socio-economic endeavours through hasty enactment of the controversial Anti-Grazing and Anti-Night Grazing Laws (Othman, et al., 2019:3; Mohammed & Aisha, 2018:82-86, 106-107; Blench, 2011:362).

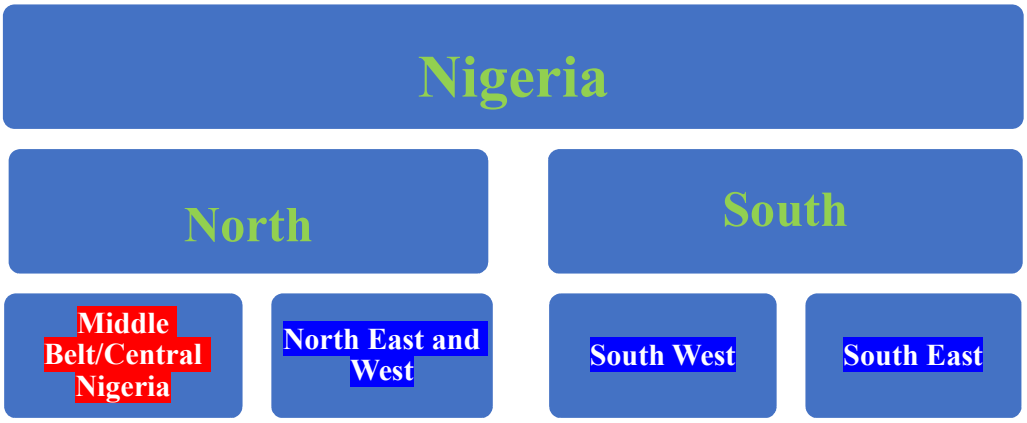


Fig 1 Geo-Regional Divisions of Nigerian State
Source Authors' Construct (2024)

Statement of the Problem

The Middle Belt of Nigeria is embroiled in a multi-faceted and controversial estrangement of geography, politics, ethnicity and religion in the larger Northern Nigeria (Mohammed, et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2018a:121). However, it has no geo-political, and ethno-linguistic cohesion to achieve its objective. Being a very strategic and also volatile area owing to its heterogeneity, economic status and strategic location, politicians manipulate the controversies, resistance and estrangement to divide and rule the people. There are factual accounts of dissent in all attempts at both 'defining and mobilising' the Middle Belt geography and its peoples comprising of hundreds of diverse and antagonistic ethno-religious groups (Suleman, 2012:20). The area, being diverse has similarly been for long experiencing recurring ethno-religious and political conflicts and violence (McDougal, Hagerty, Inks, Dowd & Conroy, 2015). The struggle is incoherent and has no popularly marked geography, policies, comprehensive and sustainable plan of actions in the event of successful break up from the North.

The elites of the area who have largely succeeded in 'imposing a historical narrative of descent and dissent' on the people to achieve their interest of accessing and consolidating their hold on to power and resources, and religious divide for 'exhuming the passion of victimhood' has been orchestrated between the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the minority non-Muslims (Suleman 2012:23), thereby creating a bitter historical animosity and pathological hatred for the Hausa/Fulani Muslims. All these have been resulting in manipulation of religion, ethnicity and geography to achieve their power and material interests, while the people have been wallowing in increasing and escalating conflicts and violence such that for example, from 2006-2014, there were 2839 deaths related to land conflicts in Nigeria of which 1657 (58.4%) occurred in the Middle Belt (Conroy, 2014:9). These figures continue to rise on daily basis while loss of property also increases as the conflicts and violence recur. This is addition to the dozens of ethno-religious conflicts which have over the years characterized the area (Aliyu & Shehu, 2015). This is not only threatening the peace, stability, unity and cohesion of the area but the Northern region and the entire Nigerian entity. It has also further strained the ethno-religious relations and cohabitation among the inhabitants of the area, North and Nigeria.

Narratives, dissidence, resentment and estrangement have characterized the Middle Belt struggles and the elites have succeeded in using Christianity to unearth victimhood and or scapegoating among the people (Suleman 2012:20, 23; Alvarez, 2010:68). These altogether have ruffled the feathers of unity in Northern Nigeria and Nigeria, and jeopardise the intra and inter ethno-religious and geo-political future of the North and any region or area to be set up based on the present Middle Belt struggles for such. There have been increased ethno-religious and political tensions in the Middle Belt as a result of the increased dissidence and estrangement, especially in the recent and with the deeper involvement of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) through controversial rejoinders, press releases, Church sermons, interviews, utterances and audio and videos which are viral over the social media (Nigeria Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), 2018b; Mohammed, 2018a:78-81; NCEF, 2018; Nigeria Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs [NSCIA], 2018a).

Conceptualisation and Review of Related Literature

One of the most difficult tasks in the study of the Middle Belt of Nigeria is defining the exact geo-ethnic/political area that constitutes it (Ochonu, 2008:118; Suleman, 2012:18, 22). Likewise, despite the fact that Middle Belt is vastly used and on daily basis in both political and academic purposes, it is problematic to locate the exact position/area on the map of Nigeria. For Ochonu (2008:118), the Middle Belt is fluid and therefore has several and competing definitions, but maintain that the conservative/territorial Middle Belt is an area comprising of Benue, Kwara, Plateau, Southern Kaduna, Kogi, the Federal capital Territory (FCT Abuja), and some parts of Adamawa, Taraba and Niger states. He however, also identifies the politically constructed 'Greater Middle Belt' which in addition to the above identified states and area, includes all non-Hausa and the Kanuri people of the Northern Region of Nigeria. With that, a progressive definition/description includes the Southern parts of Bauchi, Kebbi, Borno and Gombe also being areas with minority tribes which are manly non-Muslims and non-Hausa/Fulani, though there are Muslims among them. By default, however, all the areas apart from the mainly non-Muslims, also comprise of the Hausa/Fulani and Muslims also. Hence, the controversy over which Ochonu (2008:118), faults the description of the Middle Belt as composing of 'the non-Hausa speaking, non-Muslims' of the North which makes the definition/description 'narrower' in perspective. This is for the fact that the composition of the area is much more pluralistic than that. In the same vein, Agboola (1961:41) maintains that the Middle Belt is generally seen as a region that is characterized by inadequate 'natural and human resources' in relation to sustenance of the area's high economic performance and so its unity and sustenance can be established

dependent on its population features, as well as the political-economy of the Northern Region of Nigeria. For Angerbrandt (2015:38), although Middle Belt is used differently, it is in the context of Nigeria used to refer to the geographical area which matches the North-Central part of Nigeria and signifies the non-Muslims ethno-religious peoples who aspire to be separate and independent of the majority Hausa/Fulani Muslims of Northern Nigeria and their age long domination (Othman, et al., 2019:83). That is corroborated by Osaghae (2017:57) who simply refers to the Middle Belt as 'a geographical area in Northern Nigeria, where the bulk of Northern minorities (mostly non-Hausa/Fulani, non-Muslims) are located'. For Ballard (1971:1), the Middle Belt is the 'area roughly inscribed by the Hausa-speaking area to the north, and the Yoruba, Edo, and Ibo-speaking areas to the south'.

As the complexity/controversy with the definition and conceptualisation of the Middle Belt is largely hinged on its non-clarity and or correspondence to any single geo-political and or ethno-religious entity, it is also, defined and identified based on the 'real or imaginary' antagonist relations and co-existence within the general and larger North, and the Hausa/Fulani and Muslims whom the Middle Belt people regard as dominant and hegemonic, especially in respect of the Sokoto Caliphate and the Hausa/Fulani Muslims culture (Suleman, 2012:18). The Middle Belt area of Nigeria has one of the most diverse linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in West Africa with large number of ethnic groups and due to the incoherent character of the area, the minority, non-Muslims and non-Hausa speaking minority groups rely heavily on the religion (Christianity) in their search for both identity and cultural stance (Mohammed, et al., 2024; Othman, et al., 2019:90; Suleman, 2012:18, 21). With politics, party politics, and regionalism, Coleman and Rosberg (1970:610-611) note that distribution of constitutional powers had greatly stirred the Middle Belt minority groups to push for a separate entity from the North where they could not be dominated by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims larger North/upper North and the Emirate system. Therefore, the struggle, party politics and the religion of Christianity became intertwined in the area and characterized the struggle and estrangement as there can hardly be practice of a religion without more or less interest in the socio-political issues of a state and society, and especially that there exists a close affinity between religion and ethnicity (Haynes, 2002:116; Calvert and Calvert, 2001:140; Yinger, 1994).

The area is historically characterised by resistance, resentment and estrangement to the Hausa/Fulani Muslims dominance and rule within the North and thus Turaki (1993:145) identified some of the attempts by the Middle Belt/Non-Muslims as: "The Middle Belt Region by the ethnic groups in southern Zaria, Plateau, Benue, parts of Niger, Bauchi and Adamawa; the re-union of northern Yoruba with West in Kabba and Ilorin; the Tiv revolt and separation in 1964; and Idoma Hope Rising Development Union". The Regional Premier of the Defunct Northern Nigeria, Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello (Sardaunan Sokoto) had attested before the Willink/Minority Commission of 1958 that the clamour for division of the North and or the quest for separate identity by the Middle Belt was not from the genuine interests and desires of the common people of the area, but 'thoughts implanted in them' by politicians, parties and individuals whose interests were not in the unity and development of the Northern Region (Paden, 1986:350). The Premier was obviously referring to among others, the attempts by the Action Group (AG) party in collaboration with some Middle Belt, Missionaries and other elements to break up the North for both electoral, elites and Southern Nigeria interest of breaking the hegemony of the Northern Region in Nigerian Politics (Mohammed, 2018a:121-122; Mohammed, et al., 2024).

Similarly, Suleman (2015:17-18) recalls that the fears of the Middle Belt minorities as expressed before the Willink Commission (1958) include the dominant and hegemonic Islamic/Emirate traditional system of the North, the colonial policy of indirect rule which preserved the mainly Hausa/Fulani/Islamic/traditional system and which also threatened their native minority languages, and suspicion/fear of imposition of Sharia/Islamic laws on them.

Additionally, Turaki (1993:145) observes that "at independence, the British superstructure ceased to exist, but the second layer (Hausa-Fulani rule) continued to exist or be dominant. This then was the central fear of non-Muslims group - the possible perpetuation of the second layer after independence". For him, the fear of the 'second layer' of colonialism (continued domination and hegemony by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims) upon granting independence by the British in 1960 explains the continuous resistance to the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirate system dominance and hegemony after the Nigerian independence and up to the present. On another hand, while the Middle Belt people recount their cultural, linguistic and religious victimisation by both the Hausa/Fulani Muslims, Sokoto Caliphate/Emirates and colonialists, and seek to maintain their stiff resistance to that, the Hausa/Fulani Emirates and their people on the other hand, reveal the exact historical 'backwardness' of the Middle Belt people and emphasise the role they (Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirates system) played in civilising the people and the areas (Ochonu, 2008). This civilizational impact of the Hausa/Fulani Muslims/Emirate system on the Middle Belt people include those dress, circumcision, religion, settlements, trade, exposure, social relations and food processing among others.

Materials and Methods

This study used qualitative research design and phenomenological paradigm, and investigated the issues in estrangement and controversy in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The phenomenon lies in the Middle Belt's estrangement and struggles with the larger Northern Nigeria perceived to be dominated by the Hausa/Fulani and Muslims. Qualitative design which is effective, dynamic and flexible in study of social issues and problems (Popa, Guillermin and Dedeuwaerdere, 2015; Creswell 2012), was used to study the issues and accordingly analyse the findings from the study. The study traced the background history and evolution of the Nigerian state, conceptualized the issues and reviewed the related literature, and the explored and qualitatively analysed the issues identified in the estrangement and controversy trailing the Middle Belt of Nigeria via-a-vis the larger Northern Nigeria. The study also used historical research and documentation method of secondary data collection from archives, journals, books, Newspapers and other public records (Katz 2015). It is a means of facts finding from past and integrated historical accounts of events (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Consciousness, Opposition and the Struggles for Separate Region and Identity in the Middle Belt Nigeria

The Middle Belt struggles which include the quest for separate region and regional identity within the North and Nigeria have become what a prominent and staunch Middle Belt advocate, Patrick Dokotri describes as an 'article of faith which no power on earth could stop' (Mohammed, 2018a:120; Clark, 1991:205, 527). Hence the establishment of the Northern Nigeria Non-Muslims League (NNNML) in 1949 with the objective of resistance to the dominance and hegemony of the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirates system and structures and the then Northern Regional Government. As Barnes (2007) notes, a Christian identity was moulded by the Middle Belt movement which brought together the Christians from the numerous minority ethnic groups for the pursuit of their political demands for separate region/entity from the Islamic Emirates of the Northern Nigeria. Hence, 'the struggle manifested itself mainly through opposition to forces of islamisation and the drive towards uniformity in Northern Nigeria' (Suleman, 2012:23). In the pursuit of such, in February 1964, Isaac Sha'ahu of the UMBC (as cited in Tamuno, 1991: 412) and Mohammed et al. (2024:333) declared in the Northern Regional House of Assembly, Kaduna that the Tiv people felt unwanted and threatened 'to pull out of the North and the Federation as a whole. We shall be a sovereign state, we shall be joining nobody. We are 1,200,000 in population, bigger than Gambia and Mauritania'.



Fig 2 Forms and Cycle of Struggles and Estrangement in the Middle Belt, Nigeria
Source Authors' Construct (2024).

In the recent and as Madueke (2019:9) observes, the return to civilian and democratic rule has made the Middle Belt 'a hotbed of identity politics with the determination of the numerous minority ethno-religious groups in the area to take over the control of the areas which they strongly believe belonged to them from the domineering presence of the Hausa/Fulani Muslims. Thus Mang, Fois and Pes (2013:290) note for example, that there is an assumed consciousness and calls within and among the various categories of the Plateau "from elder statesmen to local politicians, radical Christian clerics to youth leaders and even academics", that there still exists an agenda by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims to conquer what remains unconquered during the famous 1804 Dan Fodio Jihad. This has prompted the resolve of the Plateau groups to resist such and explains the incessant ethno-religious conflicts within the Plateau and the entire Middle Belt between Hausa/Fulani Muslims on one hand, and the numerous minority tribes of the area.

Shehu, Othman and Osman (2017) also describe the 'old and creeping trend of ethno-religious rivalry' between the majority Hausa/Fulani and Muslims and the other Middle Belt chunk of minority and mainly Christian ethno-religious groups. This however, is non-violent but characterized by competition for resources and power, especially in public offices, employments, allocation of public social services among others.

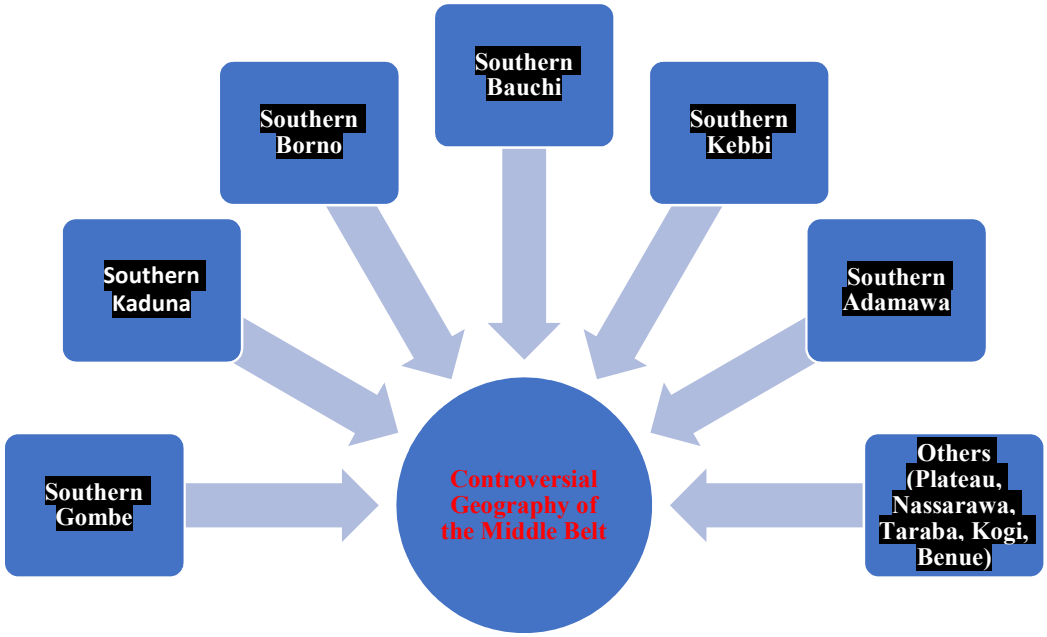


Fig 3 Controversial Geo-physical & Faultline Location of the Middle Belt
Source Authors' Construct (2024); Ochonu (2008:118); Agboola (1961:41); Osaghae (2017:57); Ballard (1971:1); Suleman (2012:18).

Conflicts and Violent Struggles in the Estranged Middle Belt of Nigeria

Conflicts and or violence inevitably occur among ethnic and or religious groups, but such are not forever as they may wane over time, experience, development and with changes being consequences of circumstances which are more often shaped by political, economic, social, ethno-religious and other interests (Ake, 2000:97). Violent conflict has been a major feature of the struggles for both separate identity and what the non-Muslims and minority groups from the Middle Belt perceive as 'emancipation' from the Northern Hausa/Fulani Muslim Emirates age long historical, political and economic domination in both the Northern regional and Nigerian affairs (Mohammed & Aisha, 2018; Turaki, 1993; Kukah, 1993; Braji, 2014; Mohammed, et al., 2018; Mohammed, 2018a; Turaki, 1999; Mohammed, et al., 2024). This has also been reiterated by the Middle Belt famous coup plotter, Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar in his national broadcast during the 22 April 1990 aborted coup in which he among others said 'our history is replete with numerous and uncontrollable instances of callous and insensitive dominatory repressive intrigues by those who think it is their birth right to dominate till eternity the political and economic privileges of this great country to the exclusion of the people of the Middle Belt and the South' (Mohammed, et al., 2018:144).

Conflict and violent struggles in the Middle Belt, however, has two dimensions of: the violent struggles between the Hausa/Fulani Muslims majority ethno-religious group on one hand and the conglomeration of the minority ethnic and mainly Christian groups on the other; and the internal/intra-ethnic struggles and violent conflicts among the minority ethno-religious groups such as the Tiv and Jukun in Benue and Taraba states, the Ran and Mwangvul tribes of Plateau State (Alubo, 2006; Mohammed, 2018a; Kalu, 2017; Alubo, 2004). The escalation of the violent struggle between the Hausa/Fulani Muslims majority group and the other minority mainly Christian groups from the Middle Belt on one hand, and among the minority groups themselves has over the years become sophisticated advancing from the use of local and ordinary arms (dane guns, machetes, axes and bows and arrows) to the use of heavy and assaulted weapons such as automatic rifles, AK47 Kalashnikov rifles, and bazookas, while the casualty and destructions increase in geometric order with increased use of professional fighters (Arowosegbe, 2016:7-8).

Similarly, the recent dimension of the struggles, conflict, violence and resistance to the Northern and Hausa/Fulani Muslims hegemony is enveloped in the now orchestrated Fulani/herdsmen and farmers' conflict in Nigeria with the Middle Belt/Central Nigeria as the main theatre of the conflict (Mohammed & Aisha, 2018:146). This new and orchestrated dimension of the conflict is apart from the old, age long, common and prevalent farmer/herdsmen conflict in the history of humankind on earth, especially the West, Central and the Horn of Africa (Udo, 1970; Lewis 1961; Carmack 1988; Fukui and Turton 1979). The new dimension of the conflict is latently used to continue and consolidate the Middle Belt peaceful and violent struggles against the general North perceived to be dominated by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the quest for separate region and identity within the North.

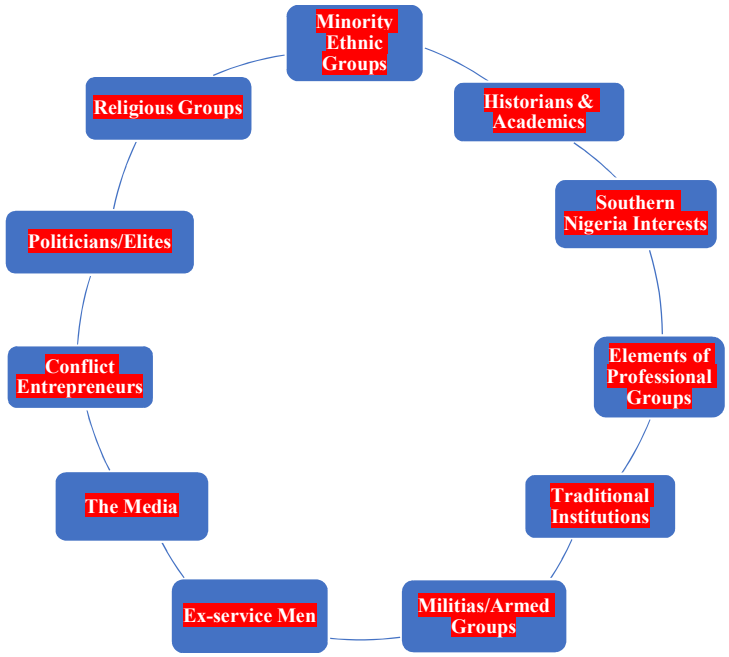


Fig 4 Stakeholders in the Middle Belt Struggles, Controversies and Estrangement
Source Authors' Construct (2024).

The Major GG Orkar 22nd April 1990 Coup Attempt and Violent Struggles in the Middle Belt

The news and execution of coups (successful and aborted ones) is not new to Nigeria and Nigerians, however, on 22 April 1990, Nigerians woke up with another but unique and bloody coup attempt that was only foiled after the heaviest fire (exchanges) in the history of coup making in Nigeria between the forces loyal to the then Federal Military Government under the military President, General Ibrahim Babangida and the dissident and rebellious forces under Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar of the Nigerian Army (Samuel, 2007:198-200). What made the coup unique was its manifest and violent extension of the continuous dissidence and resentment of the Middle Belt people which reached its peak by attempting to overthrow the government in power, and excising five far Northern and Muslim dominated states (Bauchi, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Borno) from Nigeria (Olomojobi, 2013:122-123; Mohammed, et. al., 2018:141-144; Mohammed, et al., 2024). Although there were clear indications of incoherence and disgruntle in the coup planning and execution as well as the Orkar broadcast to the nation (such as excising Sokoto state from Nigeria but at the same time interfering in the Sultanate appointment in Sokoto [although purely Muslim/Islamic religious affair]) and prompt reversal of earlier appointment; suspension of all citizens of the five excised states from the public and private services and offices in the Middle Belt and

Southern Nigeria until some conditions are met; and that the affected citizens must move back to their respective states of origin pending the fulfilment of some laid conditions (Uwuche, Bing, Derrich, Owino and Matatu, 1991; Okar as cited in Mohammed, et al., 2018:143-147). Another extent of incoherence is the composition of the coup plotters (from the Middle Belt and South) and the exclusion of the others, including the Nigerian Majority Hausa/Fulani Muslims and to (some extent) the Yorubas in the coup making with the principal officers as: Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar (the coup leader); Captains Harley Nimibibowei Emprere and Dakolo Perebo Aboela; Lieutenants Cyril Okusor Ozoalor, Awokoya Akogun E., and Nicholas Odey; 2nd Lieutenants Esuku E. J., Emmanuel Alade, and Bandeyinte Umokoro Arthur; and the Great Ogboru (who was a civilian and financier of the foiled coup) (Uwuche, Bing, Derrich, Owino, Matatu, 1991:1477 & 1489; Mohammed, et al., 2024).

In that coup making, Major Orkar (cited in Mohammed et al. 2018:143-147), accused the Northerners that 'they have over the years served and presided over the supposedly national wealth derived in the main from the Middle Belt and the southern part of this country, while the people from these parts of the country have been completely deprived from benefiting from the resources given to them by God'. He made clear mentions of the commonality of interests between the Middle Belt and Southern Nigeria; gave reasons for the coup by the Middle Belt and the South and listed some of its (Middle Belt and Southern) elements whom they felt were shabbily and dishonourably treated such as Generals Domkat Bali and Mamman Vatsa from the Middle Belt; and David West, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, Dele Giwa and Aret Adams from the South; alleged unjust retrenchment of the Middle Belt and Southern people from the public service; and alleged that there was 'deliberate impoverishment' of the people of the Middle Belt and Southern Nigeria.

Although the G G Orkar 1990 coup attempt was foiled, it has remained the most significant and memorable attempt by the Middle Belt elements to not only express their resentment, dissidence and estranged tendency, but also their determination to use all avenues, power and resources within their reach, including that of the Nigerian state in actualising their article of faith which 'no power on earth could stop'. The determination to use all avenues in the struggle, including force and or violence is strengthened by the fact that the Middle Belt minority tribes enjoy substantial presence in the Nigerian Armed Forces, especially the Nigerian Army in which they have constituted and up to the present retained the largest number of the rank and file from the Northern Region since 1960, and became numerous and fame among the officer corps from the 1970 (Ibrahim, 2000:54). Their large presence, especially in the Nigerian Army partly explains the sustenance, incessancy and recurrence of inter and intra-ethnic and religious conflicts within the Middle Belt, between the minority tribes and the majority Hausa/Fulani Muslims on one hand, and among the hostile minority tribes (Tiv/Jukun, Ran/Mwangvul, Fulani/Tiv, Fulani/Jukun, and Hausa-Fulani/Jukun among others). The violent conflict has been further sustained by the large presence of ex-soldiers from the post-civil war massive demobilization carried out in the Nigerian Army (Arowosegbe, 2016:7).

The Southern Kaduna Perspective of the Middle Belt Struggles and Estrangement

Southern Kaduna is the most famous, violent and hostile to the Hausa/Fulani Muslims, and the Emirates system and structures in the Middle Belt resistance dissidence and estrangement to the general North. Like in other parts of the Middle Belt, Christianity is the rallying point of the minority ethnic groups largely united in the struggles against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirate system and rule of Northern Nigeria in Southern Kaduna. It has a strong linkage with the other minority groups and tribes and comprises of professional, intellectuals, clergymen, public and civil servant, officers and men of the Nigerian Armed

Forces, and politicians among others, thereby making the Middle Belt struggle more popular among the people of the area and beyond (Angerbrandt, 2015:62-63; John, 2018:8).

Southern Kaduna comprises of dozens of minority tribes (Katab/Atyap, Kaje, Gbagyi, Numana, Kono, Kagoma, Chawai, Ayu, Ham, Adara, Gwong, Gure, Fwantswan, Gbagyi, Takad, Sholio, Tsam, Bajju, Atachaat, Ninzo and Oegworok among others), which have been part of the Zazzau Emirate (Osaghae 1998:9-10) and firmly regarded as part of the Middle Belt. The area has over the years, especially form the 1980s, been characterized by recurring violence in an attempt to assert the resistance, dissidence and estrangement to the Hausa/Fulani Muslim and their subordination to the Emirate system of Northern Nigeria which they considered dominant and hegemonic; that has suppressed them for over time, and push for the creation of a new state for the minorities out of the present Kaduna state in addition to frantic efforts to achieve independence from the Zaria Emirate (Osaghae, 1998:9-10).

Apart from the incessant and escalating ethno-religious and indigene-settler conflicts which characterise the area with notable conflicts of Zangon Kataf (1987) and dozens of others that followed it. In the Zangon Kataf and around it incessant conflicts, the minority tribes who considered themselves as indigenes and the Hausa/Fulani Muslims as settlers, have been both violent and destructive and the Hausa/Fulani Muslims (who are outnumbered by the minority tribes) suffer the heaviest casualty and their properties including houses, cars and market stalls/business premises destroyed and or burnt to ashes (Mustapha, 2000:91; Mustapha, 1994).

The Southern Kaduna perspective of the Middle Belt struggle has in the recent taken the online (social media/facebook) front with a 'closed' facebook group established by the Southern Kaduna professionals for the purpose of emancipation of its people from what they perceived as socio-political oppression and 'poor self-esteem' and seeking to 'empower and enlighten' its people. The group as studied by John (2018:9), has over 11,000 members of whom the largest number are Christians, just as the group's tones, undertones, and geo-religious and ethnic identities reflect Christianity. Accordingly, the group is highly characterised by 'overarching narratives' of genocide, pogrom, annihilation and oppression by the 'Feudalistic and Religious zealots' (Hausa-Fulani Muslims) (John, 2018:12). While the Southern Kaduna perspective of the Middle Belt estrangement comprises of many elements from the numerous minority groups in the area, it has a visibly close association and harmony of mission and objectives with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), especially under the Southern Kaduna Peoples Union (SOKAPU) - a union comprising of the elements of Southern Kaduna and predominantly Christians. Among the SOKAPU members are peoples from various strata but united in Christianity and the struggle for resistance and dissidence with the Hausa/Fulani Muslims, the domination and hegemony of the Emirate system in Southern Kaduna and the entire Middle Belt with the significant influence of CAN as major avenue for the Northern minorities interest expression and vocalisation as Osaghae (1998) observes.

Narratives and the Middle Belt Struggles

It is lamented by Itumo (2017) that allegations of marginalisation and or domination by ethno-religious and other groups has become a 'fashion' in Nigeria and is falsely used to draw attention, obtain allocation of both power and or resources and social services. One major feature of the Middle Belt struggles is the peoples' incessant and fervent cry against the age long oppression, domination and marginalization by the dominant and majority Hausa/Fulani Muslims (Turaki, 1999; Ochonu, 2008:115; Kukah, 1993; Turaki, 1993; Orkar as cited in Mohammed, et al., 2018:144; Mohammed, et al., 2024). However, and as Mohammed (2018a:39-45) and Paden (1986: 64-275, 335-337, 343-345, 357-35) document, some of the cries are high fallacious, especially in respect of the colonial and the Northern Regional Government composition, distribution of services. Thus Ochonu (2008:105) notes

that 'there is no evidence that there was an ideological or programmatic conspiracy on the part of the 19th Century British explorers to an ideological or programmatic conspiracy on the part of the 19th Century European explorers of northern Nigeria with the expressed purpose of subordinating the Middle Belt to the Caliphate'.

To achieve some objectives through the narratives and cries against the domination and marginalization, there is increasing pressure, cries among others, including common, fallacious and unsubstantiated narratives by various groups, individuals and even some states governments from such areas (Mohammed, 2018a; Chris as cited in Asaju & Egberi, 2015:131). The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which most people of the Middle Belt regard as the religious (Christian) umbrella for canvassing their resistance to the North and Hausa/Fulani Muslims domination and rule, and championing their causes and interests, has also become lured and embroiled in the 'fashion' of cry against the domination and marginalization (Mohammed, 2018a:80-81). In the recent, the National Christian Elders Forum (NCEF) has also been intensifying such cries, propaganda, negative stereotypes, narratives and open resistance to the now ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) party (which it more or less consider as pro-North and the orchestrated Islamic agenda) and its public policies and had to a large extent succeeded among the Christians and opposition in convincing them of attempts by the Hausa/Fulani Muslims in collaboration with national leaders to continue with the 1804 Dan Fodio Jihad and march to the sea, islamise Nigeria and impose Sharia (National Christian Elders Forum [NCEF] Conference, 2018:1-16). In the process, false alarms are being raised and further suspicion, tension and ethno-religious acrimony further spread over the North and Nigeria. This involvement of CAN and soiling its name in the Middle Belt struggle and violent conflicts are on one hand not far from what has been decried in Nigeria as the 'rumour and conspiracy mill' (Omilusi, 2015:161).

Some other narratives of slave raiding and trade have also been manipulated and being used by the Middle Belt minorities against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirates and the status quo including reversing and reframing the history. This includes the use of narratives, historiography and 'local publications', which refresh the memory on slave raiding and trade among the Middle Belt people and portraying them as the victims. With those, anger is spread to their younger generations who have now been using it as 'scapegoating' in order to justify the exclusion and ejection of the Hausa/Fulani Muslims with increasing political exclusion, hostility and destructions against the mercantile Hausa/Fulani Muslims (Blench, 2011:362; Suleman, 2012; Alvarez, 2010:68; Douglas, 1995:41; Suleman, 2015:188, 112-115, 224).

There are also narratives of genocide against the minority tribes of the area which is not only widespread among the religious (Christian) institutions, but also viral over the social media, and re-enforced by some of the elites using the banner of religion and ethnicity, and ethno-religious groups and organisation (John, 2018:12; Mohammed and Aisha, 22018:100-101; NCEF, 2018:1-16).These are all other dimensions of the struggles and estrangement by the Middle Belt people (mainly Christian and Non-Hausa/Fulani) against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims, and the Emirates system and structure of Northern Nigeria. Suffice to say that the non-Muslim Northern minorities, apart from their involvement in the struggles against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and their Emirate system domination and hegemony, are themselves fixed in 'intra-minorities conflicts', especially on political power, resources and land matters (Osaghae, 1998:10).



Fig 5 Drivers/Vehicles of Conflicts and Controversies in the Middle Belt
Source Authors' Construct (2024)

The Middle Belt and Southern Nigeria

Alliance/association between the Northern and Southern regions and groups has been recurring feature in Nigeria, especially in politics (Ibrahim 2000), but the Middle Belt and the South has been uniquely characterised by association of some political separatism, separatists and violent tendencies and interests, including the various attempts to and the actual use of violence which manifested variously such as during the First Republic politics on issues of Ilorin/Kabba Merger; the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC)/Action Group (AG) alliance (Mohammed 2018b:11; Mohammed et al. 2024); the planned attempts to unleash violence in the Middle Belt, North and Nigeria on the eve of the 1983 general elections through establishment of 'Guerilla Training Camps' in 7 Zones from where to launch attacks as planned by the aligned Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) controlled government of Plateau state, as well as some notable Middle Belt elites in the execution of their 'Three-Point Plan' (New Nigerian, March 10, 1984, pp. 5 and 11; Mohammed, 2018a:121, 123, 127); the G G Orkar 22 April 1990 aborted coup and the special broadcast to the nation in which he declared open association and commonality of interests between the Middle Belt and the Southern people saying that: 'On behalf of the patriotic and well-meaning people of the Middle Belt and the Southern parts of this country, I, Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar …. we wish to emphasize that this is not just another coup but a well-conceived, planned and executed revolution for the marginalized, oppressed and enslaved people of the Middle Belt and the South with a view to freeing ourselves and our children yet unborn from eternal slavery and colonisation by a clique of this country'. He further accused the Northerners that: 'They have almost succeeded in subjugating the Middle Belt and making them voiceless and now extending same to the South'; and that: 'they have over the years served and presided over the supposedly national wealth derived in the main from the Middle Belt and the southern part of this country, while the people from these parts of the country have been completely deprived from benefiting from the resources given to them by God' (Mohammed, et al., 2018:143-144; Mohammed, 2018a:128).

The other and strategic, but not fully executed violence orchestrated by the Middle Belt people including the former Second Republic Plateau state governor, Mr. Solomon Lar of the Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) and the people of Southern Nigeria in the alliance (People's

Progressive Alliance [PPA]) between the NNP and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) was to orchestrate violence during the 1983 General Elections. It was planned and agreed upon as moved by Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the UPN that 'Guerilla Training Camps' were to be established in each of the 7 Zones (established in the plan) across the then 19 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, while 'Guerilla Fighters' and or 'State Guards' were be absorbed and provided with 'arms and ammunition' to be secured (as agreed in the 'Lagos Action Plan') through contribution of N250, 000.00 each from the PPA members. Similarly, the 7 Zones were categorized as: Zone I – Plateau state (as the headquarters) with Gindiri and 'rocky areas of Pankshin' as the 'training depots', and Bauchi, Benue, Niger, and Kaduna states; Zone II – Borno state (as the headquarters), and Gongola state; Zone III – Kano state (as the headquarters) with Falgore Game Reserve as the training camp, and Sokoto state; Zone IV – Oyo state (as the headquarters), Bendel and Kwara states; Zone V – Ogun state (as the headquarters) with Ikenne as the training camp, and Ondo state; Zone VI – Anambra state (as the headquarters), and Cross-River state; Zone VII – Imo state (as the headquarters), and Rivers state. The headquarters for the guerilla training were strategically in what the PPA believed were states 'controlled by the progressives.' Accordingly, ex-servicemen were engaged by the PPA alliance and training commenced in some of the camps (Mohammed, et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2018a:121, 123, 127; Weekly Trust, December 15-21, 2000, pp. 38; New Nigerian, March 10, 1984, pp. 5 and 11; National Concord, October 24, 1983, pp. 12).

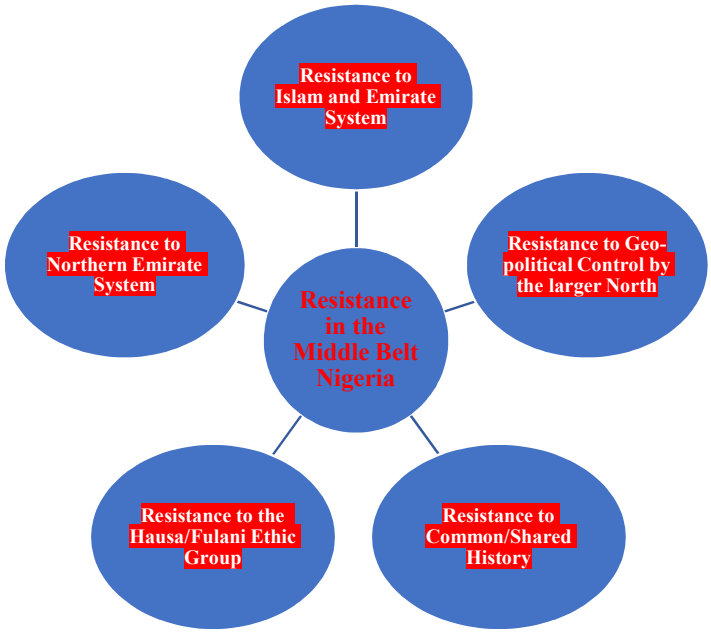


Fig 6 Resistance in the Middle Belt, Nigeria
Source Authors' Construct (2024)

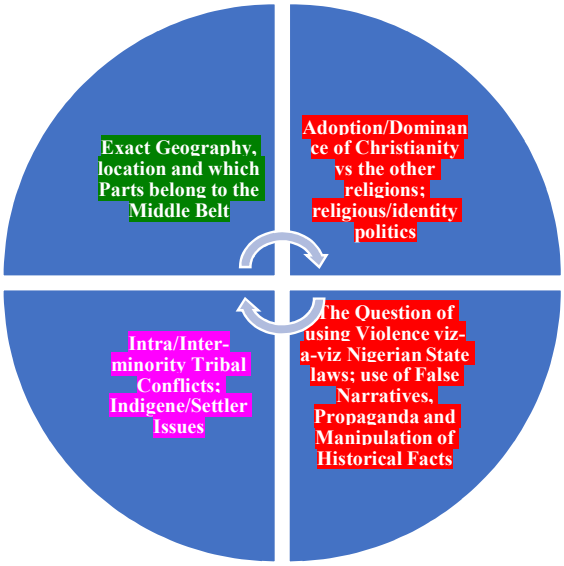


Fig 7 Controversies in the Middle Belt Struggles and Estrangement
Source Authors Compilation (2024)

Conclusion and Summary

This study delved into and explored issues of the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The resentment, dissent, dissidence and estrangement by the people of the area is not new in the history of the North and Nigeria and is neither likely to end nor achieve its objectives in the near future. There are controversies and no cohesion in respect of the geography, composition and politics in the area and the struggles for the separate identity, region and ethno-religious set up. It is also characterized by stiff resentment and estrangement between the mainly non-Muslims minority tribes of the area and the majority Hausa/Fulani and Muslims of Northern Nigeria, and their Emirate system and structures which they consider as dominant, hegemonic, repressive and oppressive. The elites of the area have successfully used religion (Christianity) as a tool for rallying the various groups of the area and pitching them against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims, and the general North. The minority groups of the area are bent on using both public and private offices and resources, and peaceful and violent means to achieve and assert their separate political, geographical, religious and cultural identity from the general North. The struggle for the separate identity is as old as the history of the formation of Nigerian state and is carried out in several and dynamic dimensions and means (peace, violence, politics, public and private institutions, the traditional and social media, economy, religion [Christianity] and religious centres [Churches], stereotype, narratives, historiography, lies and fallacies, cries against marginalization, conspiracy, orchestration of conflicts) depending on the specific scene, time and situation, and power and resources at hand. The past history of the area in terms socio-economic and geo-religious relations and co-existence with the larger North, Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirates of Northern Nigeria is being manipulated and re-told, re-written and published to suit the estrangement tendencies of the Middle Belt minority groups and their struggles and against the Hausa/Fulani Muslims and the Emirate system and structures of Northern Nigeria. Over the history and period of the Middle Belt estrangement, the elites of the area have effectively manipulated the situation to suit their interests of accessing and consolidating their hold onto power and resources in the area. Likewise, the Southern Nigeria politicians have been manipulating the Middle Belt estrangement to achieve their political interest of breaking the Northern Nigerian hegemony

and dominance in terms of geography and population of Nigeria while disguising in the name of alliances and associating with the people of the Middle Belt.

Although the struggle is old and continuing, in the event of successful break up from the north, there is no popularly accepted geo-political arrangement, coherent and sustainable plan of action, and mutual trust among the stakeholders, especially the numerous ethnic groups. Owing to the various factors - heterogeneous, volatile, controversial and complex nature of the Middle Belt; the hostile intra-ethnic cohabitation among the ethnic groups and their large number in the area; the age long antagonism between some of the ethnic groups; the determination of the elites within and outside the area to use and manipulate religion, ethnicity and geography to divide and rule the people, it would be most difficult for the area to achieve any cohesive separate identity vis-à-vis the general North. Similarly, although the incessant ethno-religious and land related conflicts in Northern Nigeria have multiple undertones, they also have significant connections with the estrangement by the Middle Belt people, especially in parts of Taraba, Kaduna, Jos and Benue states. The Northern and Nigerian state authorities should rise up to the challenge and curtail all separatists' tendencies and also ensure justice to all Nigerians. There should also be social justice among the various ethno-religious and regional groups and societies, incessant ethno-religious conflicts should be decisively handled with a determination to end the matter, activities of the various national and ethno-religious and geo-regional groups need to controlled by Nigerian state authorities to ensure peace and security in the country, and stiff control on arms and light weapons in the hands of civilians.

Limitations and Way Forward

This paper explored the estrangement and controversies in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. Issues relating to the Middle Belt are wide, numerous and diverse. Future and or in-depth studies on the area could also focus on the intra-ethnic violent conflicts in the area; rivalry among the minority groups of the area; political and economic feasibility study of the area as a separate region/area; and roles and impact of the elites and religion in the Middle Belt struggles for separate identity and area; the strength and quality of politicians/elites in the Middle Belt struggles.

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