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Hobbesian Social Contract Theory and Insecurity in the South-East Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The South-East region of Nigeria has witnessed a surge in violence perpetrated by unknown gunmen, exemplified by a surge in violent crimes and kidnapping incidents. Hobbes constructed a provocative and compelling argument for why we ought to be willing to submit ourselves to political authority. He does this by imagining persons in a situation prior to the establishment of society and government, the state of nature. There were limited resources coupled with lack of power able to force men to co-operate. There is a consistent threat by everyone, of annihilation and the state can adequately be described as a state of utter distrust, a state of perpetual and unavoidable war. There is a full display of man's untamed animal nature. Examining the economic and political context of South-East during this period is crucial as factors such as unemployment, poverty, and perceived marginalization have contributed to a sense of discontent and frustration among the population. In the South-East, criminal elements took advantage of the prevailing instability, causing fear and insecurity among the local population. Understanding how the Hobbesian social contract theory, which emphasizes the role of a strong central authority in maintaining order, intersects with this security crisis in the South-East region of Nigeria is essential in this study. It is imperative also to assess whether the social contract between the government and its citizens has been upheld or has broken down. This paper is anchored on Thomas Hobbes social contract theory as its analytical framework. The paper examines why the South-East has been faced with insecurity and high rate of crime and makes recommendations on how the Hobbesian social contract theory can be utilized to understand and tackle the insecurity and high rate of crime in South-East Nigeria.

Keywords: Hobbes, Social Contract Theory, Insecurity, South-East, Nigeria

Introduction

Hobbesian social contract theory, detailed in *Leviathan*, posits that individuals give up certain liberties to a sovereign ruler to escape the "state of nature", a chaotic, violent, and short life without law or morality. In return for security and order, the absolute sovereign maintains laws and protects subjects. This arrangement is a voluntary agreement to avoid the brutal conflict of nature, with people trading freedom for protection under a powerful, central authority. Hobbes constructed a provocative and compelling argument for why we ought to be willing to submit ourselves to political authority. He does this by imagining persons in a situation prior to the establishment of society and government, the state of nature, in this state, man's freedom to plunder, rape and murder knew no restrictions. There were limited resources coupled with lack of power able to force men to co-operate. There is a consistent threat by everyone, of annihilation and the state can adequately be described as a state of utter distrust, a state of perpetual and unavoidable war. There is a full display of man's untamed animal nature, leaving everyone to live independently of everyone else, acting only in his or her own self-interest, without regard to others.

This produces what is termed the 'state of war' a way of life that is certain to prove anarchical, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (*Leviathan* 1, 13). In the words of Okeke (2005), the only escape from such state or societal brutality is by entering into contracts with each other, mutually beneficial agreements to surrender our individual interests in order to achieve the advantages of security that only a social existence can provide (*Leviathan* 1, 14). For Hobbes therefore, the origin of the formation of the state which he referred to as the commonwealth is a consequence of the people's inability to rely indefinitely on their individual powers to secure livelihood and contentment. It is this commonwealth that becomes an embodiment of network of associated contracts and provides for the highest form of social organization and according to Hobbes, the formation of commonwealth creates a new, artificial person (*The Leviathan*) to whom all responsibility for social order and public welfare is entrusted (*Leviathan* 11, 17).

However, the contract theorists emphasize on human nature as the starting point for the formation of the state. Epicureans argued that what is good is a feeling privately enjoyed and that social arrangements are justified, if at all, only as devices to secure the largest possible private good. There is no such thing as absolute justice, only conventions made in mutual intercourse, providing against the infliction of suffering or harm.

From the above viewpoint Nnoli (2003: 28) asserts that states are formed solely for the sake of obtaining security, especially against the aggressiveness of other men. All men are essentially selfish and seek only their own good. In this way the good of everyone is threatened by the selfish actions of all men. Accordingly, men enter into a tacit agreement with each other neither to inflict nor to suffer harm. Thus, the state and law come into existence as a contract to facilitate co-operation between men. The full possibilities of such a political philosophy based on pure self-interest could not be fully popularised until the anarchic and civil war conditions of the modern Europe. The first major philosopher to exploit this selfish element of human nature to Nnoli is Machiavelli. Behind nearly everything that he said about political policy was the assumption that human nature is essentially selfish,

and that the effective motives on which a statesman must rely are egoistic ones, such as the desire for security in the masses and the desire for power in the rulers. Human nature is seen as profoundly aggressive and acquisitive. Consequently, men are always in a condition of strife and competition that threatens to cause anarchy unless restrained by the force of the community. The state arises to fulfil this need to restrain. The state and force behind it are the only power that holds society together. Therefore, moral obligations must in the end be derived from the state.

Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory offers an interesting lens through which to see the contemporary issue of insecurity in the South-East Nigeria. Hobbes in his theory, emphasized the need for a strong central authority to prevent chaos and maintain social order. The prevalence of 'unknown gunmen', often associated with criminal activities, insurgency, or separatist movements, points to a breakdown in the social contract within the South-East. In Hobbesian terms, the South-East of Nigeria might be perceived as experiencing a state of nature, where the absence of a strong, legitimate authority results in insecurity, conflict, and a general lack of order. The unknown gunmen operating outside the bounds of established authority, could be seen as symptomatic of a society where the social contract has eroded or is inadequately enforced.

The south-east region grapple with a deteriorating security situation, exemplified by a surge in violent crime and kidnapping incidents. Criminal elements took advantage of the prevailing instability, causing fear and insecurity among the local population. This has led to the emergence of 'unknown gunmen' in the region. There has been a recurring and alarming issue of unknown gunmen that has raised serious concerns among both the local population and the Nigerian government (Nwakibe, 2021). These individuals, often operating covertly and anonymously, have been associated with a series of violent incident, including attacks on security personnel, abductions, and sporadic outbreaks of violence. The problem is complex and multifaceted, stemming from a combination of historical, socio-economic, and political factors. Nwachukwu (2002) opined that some individuals may have turned to violence as a means of expressing their grievances and seeking change. Socio-economic factors have also contributed to the emergence of these gunmen. High levels of unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education have left many young people in the region feeling marginalized and without viable opportunities. Some individuals have been drawn into criminal activities, including joining these unidentified groups, as a way to secure their livelihoods.

It is pertinent to say that, political landscape in Nigeria has added another layer of complexity to this issue. Allegations of police brutality, human rights abuses, and perceived political marginalization have fuelled public discontent, potentially leading to the rise of such groups. Other factors contributing to this insecurity include provocative remarks by organizations such as Myetti Allah and some political figures, the federal government's failure to address herders' excesses, military operations in the South-East often attributed to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) or the Eastern Security Network (ESN) without thorough investigations, harsh economic policies, widespread corruption, and seemingly selective anti-corruption campaign (Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta, 2024). The inability of government to address these grievances effectively has further exacerbated the problem, leading to a cycle of violence and insecurity.

The region has been experiencing a significant increase in violent incidents attributed to the activities of unknown gunmen, IPOB, Fulani herdsmen, ESN etc. including attacks on police stations, public infrastructure, and civilians. This actions to Eze (2019), demonstrated the potency of the threat and its potential to disrupt the social fabric of the region. The situation continues to deteriorate, with various reports of kidnappings, extortion, and targeted attacks. The contemporary South-East Nigeria can be related to Hobbesian social contract theory, as it illustrates the breakdown of the social contract and the consequences of such breakdown. The Hobbesian social contract theory underscores the significance of a sovereign authority responsible for maintaining order and security in exchange for the compliance of individuals in social contract. In South-East Nigeria, historical and contemporary grievances, coupled with the government's inability to effectively address them, have contributed to a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement among the local populace. This discontent can lead to a rejection of the social contract, as citizens may no longer perceive the government as fulfilling its obligation to provide security and uphold order (Hobbes, 1651).

It is in the context of government's inability to keep to the spirit and letters of social contract theory and the actions of some individuals that have been drawn into criminal activities, including joining unidentified groups as a way to secure their livelihood, that this study critically investigated the Hobbesian social contract theory and insecurity in South-East Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The South-East region of Nigeria has witnessed a surge in violence perpetrated by 'unknown gunmen, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) or the Eastern Security Network (ESN). There are other various forms of insecurity in the region, including armed robbery, kidnapping, ritual killings, high-profile assassinations, and farmer herder conflicts. Understanding how the Hobbesian social contract theory which emphasizes the role of a strong central authority in maintaining order, intersects with this security crisis is essential. Hobbes argued that individuals in the state of nature would enter into a social contract, surrendering some of their natural rights to a sovereign authority in exchange for protection and security. In the South-East, it is imperative to assess whether the social contract between the government and its citizens has been upheld or has broken down.

According to Ukwu et al. (2024) the South-East, once relatively peaceful while recovering from civil war destruction has been particularly affected. Efforts at rebuilding and reintegration have stalled since 2015, coinciding with president Muhammadu Buhari's administration. The Guardian Editorial Board (2022) notes that while violence and insecurity in the South-East have been longstanding issues, the Federal Government has been ineffective in addressing them despite controlling state security forces. Many violent incidents have been blamed on 'unknown gunmen', but security personnel have struggled to identify or apprehend the culprits. Imo State Governor Hope Uzodimma, who initially promised to expose these perpetrators, later referred to security agencies to handle the situation. Okoye (2021) opined that IPOB's 'sit at home' directive, introduced in August 2021 to commemorate those who died in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, evolved into a platform for advocating Biafran causes. Under Nnamdi Kanu's leadership, IPOB gained prominence and called for South-East independence. Following Kanu's extradition to

Nigeria for trial, the directive led to weekly shutdowns in the region, with residents compelled to comply out of fear of attacks from enforcers.

Furthermore, examining the economic and political context of the contemporary South-East is crucial. Factors such as unemployment, poverty, and perceived marginalization have contributed to a sense of discontent and frustration among the populace. Hobbesian social contract theory can be used to analyse how these economic and political factors influence citizens' perception of the state and her inability to provide both security of lives and property. It is also pertinent to explore the response of the Nigerian government to menace of unknown gunmen in the South-East. The Hobbesian social contract theory posits that the state should maintain a monopoly of the use of force. Thus, if the government's response is seen as inadequate or ineffective, it may further erode the social contract, degenerate to the Hobbesian state of nature and exacerbate security crisis. Examining the role of non-state actors and their potential influence on the menace of insecurity in the South-South is imperative. These actors may include separatist groups, criminal organizations, or external influences, and their actions can as well complicate the security situation in the South-East. Understanding how these actors fit into the broader social contract framework and their motivations is essential for a comprehensive analysis.

This insecurity to Ukwu et al. (2024) has traumatized the South-East, undermining its peace, safety, and property. A once resource-rich region now grapples with fear and significant threats to lives and property. They maintained that land disputes and inter-communal conflicts were the primary security issues in the Southeast, typically resolved through traditional and formal mechanisms. However, the emergence of 'unknown gunmen' Fulani herders drastically transformed the security landscape, making fear a daily reality. Violence by herders has escalated tensions, prompting IPOB to issue retaliatory threats. Military responses to attacks on personnel or herders have included village raids, further worsening tensions. The activities of 'unknown gunmen' have added another layer of complexity, with targeted assassinations of prominent Igbo individuals, attacks on security personnel, and military reprisals against South-East youths under the guise of insecurity operations. The situation to them has deteriorated to the extent that clergy are abducted and murdered, 'sit at home' orders are violently enforced, and attacks on law enforcement are frequent. Military responses often involve indiscriminate village raids over minor provocations.

It is important to note that for order and security to be restored, and the social contract, effective in the South-East, it is necessary to explore the complex web of economic, political, and security dynamics, as well as the evolving role of non-state actors. The ability of the state to offer protection to the citizens which is its sole justification for existence is adequately required. If it becomes obvious that the state could no longer guarantee security of lives and property, then it lost its justification for existence and anarchy would be the order of the day.

Literature Review

Social Contract Theory

Social contract has diverse interpretations across various philosophical traditions. One prominent perspective, rooted in the works of a thinker: Thomas Hobbes, posits that social contract is a

hypothetical agreement wherein individuals willingly surrender certain natural liberties to a governing authority in exchange for collective security and order (Hobbes, 1651). This perspective emphasizes the necessity of a centralized power to prevent the chaos inherent in the state of nature. Hobbes' formulation underscores the contractual nature of the relationship between citizens and the state, establishing a foundational framework for subsequent discussions on political authority. Hobbes is adjudged the best known contract theorists not only because of the extreme radicalism of his thought but also because of the impeccable logic of his ideas. In Nnoli (2003), Hobbes argued that the natural condition of humanity-the state of nature-was a thoroughly unpleasant one. Individual were concerned only with their own selfish interests but since all individuals were roughly equal in their physical strength and cunning it was difficult for anyone to succeed. Instead people lived in a state of anarchy, in constant fear of death.

In contrast, John Locke's social contract theory as articulated in his work 'Two Treatise of Government' (1690), introduces a more optimistic view, Locke contends that individuals consent to government for the protection of their natural rights, such as life, liberty, and property, but retains the right to rebel if the government fails to uphold its end of the social contract (Locke, 1690). The implication to Locke is that the authority of the government must be based on the consent of the people; that the community is the legitimate source of political power; that the powers of the monarch are limited; that the main object of the government is to help the people not to ruin them; and that the government must be resisted if it steps beyond its bounds-that is, its proper authority-or overlooks the common good (Mbah, 2006). This perspective introduces the idea of government accountability and highlights the empowering nature of the social contract for individuals within a political society.

Jean Jacques Rousseau in his influential work 'The Social Contract' (1762), takes a different approach by emphasizing the collective will of the people. According to Rousseau, the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights, and included in this version of the social contract is the idea of reciprocated duties: the sovereign is committed to the good of the individuals who constitute it, and each individual is likewise committed to the good of the whole. In Rousseau's definite words:

Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.

For Rousseau thus, individuals cannot be given liberty to decide whether it is in their own interests to fulfil their duties to the sovereign, while at the same time being allowed to reap the benefits of citizenship. They must be made to conform to the general will, they must be 'forced to be free'. Rousseau argues for a 'General Will' that reflects the common interests of the community, emphasizing the importance of direct democracy in ensuring a just social contract. This perspective shifts the focus from individual rights to the community shared values and objectives, contributing to the diversity of social contract theory.

Insecurity

Insecurity is a state or feeling of anxiety, fear, or self-doubt. It is also a global crisis with profound socio-economic consequences. In the words of (Ayoola 2022), insecurity is the inability to take

defensive action against forces that portend harm or danger to an individual or group. To Beland (2015), insecurity entails a lack of protection from crime and psychological harm. Hence insecurity is the breach of peace and security where historical, religious, ethno-regional contribute to recurring conflicts and leads to wanton destruction of lives and properties (Ewetan & Urhie, 2014). It is a state of being unsafe from harm. Causes of insecurity can be classified as remote, proximate and immediate factors (Achumba, Ighomereho & Akpor-Robaro, 2013). The root causes of insecurity are the inefficiency of government institutions, pervasiveness, inequalities and unfairness in managing the treasures of the state, ethno-religious conflicts, clash of interest between the government and the public, and youth unemployment; all of which lead to mass poverty in the society. Hazen and Horner (2007) avers that insecurity in most cases is a resultant effect of the failure or inefficiency of government institutions.

According to Nwagbo and Ofoke (2025), the current trend of attacks and killings by herdsmen and unknown gunmen in South-East can be traceable to the above view of Achumba et al. (2013) on the causes of insecurity; particularly lack of institutional capacity resulting in government failure, pervasive material inequalities and unfairness, ethno-religious conflicts as well as leads to the proliferation of crime (Iyare, 2018). This has ranged from killings by herdsmen to more sophisticated attacks by the unknown gunmen-armed bandits who perpetrate criminal activities, especially in the South-East region. Hence, unknown gunmen is a name associated with other criminal actors who have capitalized on the perplexing situation of sit-at-home to carry out attacks within the area undetected. This has degenerated into increased banditry in South-East. Nwagbo and Ofoke (2025) noted that since late 2020 when the activities of the unknown gunmen became more prominent in the South-East, multiple attacks on security personnel and infrastructure especially the Nigerian Police Force by the unknown gunmen have been recorded in South-East. While the Nigerian government through security agencies has consistently indicted IPOB for the targeted assaults; the IPOB has denied being responsible for the violent attacks. This leaves the situation in a perplexed state; the government's stance on IPOB's involvement in the attacks, the group's unwavering denials and the continuity of the attacks (Emeruwa, 2021). The major soft targets of the unknown gunmen have been security agencies and public structures such as markets, schools and government institutions. There have been several instances where police stations, military checking points and INEC offices were attacked. Many security operatives have lost their lives to unknown gunmen (Esho, 2022). Five months into 2021, 149 people have been killed in 36 attacks in South-East Nigeria as document by Nextier Security, Peace and Development (SPD) Violent Conflict Database (Ezeobi, 2021).

Nwagbo and Ofoke (2025) further maintained that the growing rate of insecurity in the South-East is very alarming and it calls for concern as it has continued to increase unabated. Data from International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) (2003) signifies that the emergence of the restive activities of Fulani Herdsmen and 'unknown gunmen' have worsened insecurity in the South-East region. The data shows that between 2020 and 2021, the rate of killings in South-East increased from 194-1,272. This is more than 600% increase. Hence, Adagba, Ugwu and Eme (2022) is of the view that lingering insecurity challenges and the inability of the security apparatus of the government to guarantee safety and security in the country is a clear indication that the efforts of government have not yielded enough positive result. Hence, one

could ask, is the security of lives and properties achievable. Apparently, the security situation in the South-East Nigeria appears insurmountable. While many people have argued that government at all levels have not done enough by not confronting the situation head on and dealing with it decisively; others have argued that the situation has political undertone or inclination calculated to serve the interest of certain disgruntled political gladiators who seems unfavoured by political reality of Nigeria (Amana & Okpoko, 2023). While on one hand, some people accused the IPOB to be the creator of unknown gunmen, the IPOB on the other hand insist that unknown gunmen was created by the Buhari's government to destabilize the peace and security of the South-East region (Amana & Okpoko, 2023).

It is however, important here to emphasize the role of good governance and equitable policies in addressing insecurity in the South-East region. Inclusive governance and economic reforms can also help to restore peace, security and promote development in the region. social contract theory is pertinent to understanding the insecurity in the South-East Nigeria, where a perceived failure of the government to fulfil its obligation-such as ensuring security and providing socio-economic services-has eroded the social contract. Issues like rampant kidnappings, banditry, and the disruptive sit-at-home orders illustrate this breakdown, feeling abandoned, citizens increasingly rely on self-help measures, such as vigilante groups, which further challenge state authority. This situation underscores the urgent need for governance reforms to restore public trust and effectively deliver basic services.

Gap in Literature

Although several studies have investigated insecurity in Nigeria, including Ayoola (2002) on Foreign Direct Investment and Adagba, Ugwu and Eme (2022) on Boko Haram, and more regional focused works such as Nwagbo and Ofoke (2025) on leadership and socioeconomic implications of insecurity in South-East Nigeria, and Amana and Okpoko (2023) on the economic effects of IPOB sit-at-home orders, these studies are largely descriptive and lack a strong theoretical framework. Furthermore, while classical political theories such as those of Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1690) and Jean Jacques Rousseau 1767 have been extensively discussed in Western literature, there is limited scholarly effort to critically apply Hobbesian social contract theory to explain contemporary insecurity in the South-East context. This study therefore fills this gap by critically analysing insecurity in South-East Nigeria through the lens of Hobbesian social contract theory, arguing that the persistence of insecurity reflects a breakdown of the state's fundamental obligation to provide security, leading to a reversion to a state of nature.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Thomas Hobbes Social Contract Theory as espoused in the *Leviathan* (1651). In the spirit of Social Contract Theory, consensual mutually beneficial agreement is the basis of government; the government is entitled to rule because the people agreed to be ruled. Man, according to this theory, was originally in the state of nature which was also described by Hobbes as 'state of war' a way of life that is certain to prove anarchical, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. The state of nature was that of anarchy; and man had to submit parts of his rights to a supreme authority (*Leviathan*) that will protect and established a state or government. In the social contract theory on the other hand, citizens surrender certain natural rights to the

sovereign, and in return, the sovereign guarantees security and order. When the state fails to fulfil this obligation, the contract is breached and society drifts back into a state of insecurity. Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory offers an interesting lens through which to see the contemporary issue of insecurity in the South-East Nigeria. Hobbes in his theory, emphasized the need for a strong central authority to prevent chaos and maintain social order. The prevalence of 'unknown gunmen', often associated with criminal activities, insurgency, or separatist movements, points to a breakdown in the social contract within the South-East.

Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory becomes particularly apparent when examining contemporary issues such as insecurity, unknown gunmen, military operations in the South-East often attributed to the Indigenous People Of Biafra (IPOB), or the Eastern Security Network (ESN), farmer-herder conflicts in South-East Nigeria etc. Hobbes addressed the need for a social contract to establish order and prevent chaos. The persistent insecurity can be described as a manifestation of the breakdown in the social contract. The inability of the Nigerian state and South-East Governors to provide adequate security has led to the proliferation of non-state actors and communal self-defence. Consequently, South-East is experiencing a Hobbesian state of nature where violence and fear dominate. The current situation in the South-East, marked by violence and insecurity perpetrated by 'unknown gunmen', offers a lens through which Hobbesian social contract theory can be applied. Hobbes in his social contract theory provides a useful tool to analyse how state failure to secure citizens has led to the current insecurity in the South-East.

Method of Data Collection

The study adopted the critical discourse analysis in examining the secondary data on previous works done in this area of study while paying attention on the condition of the South-East Nigeria as a result of the inability of the state to provide security for the citizens as observed by Thomas Hobbes. This paper made use of descriptive analysis which entails the use of secondary sources of data in presenting research details. Going by the classification of research methods by Obasi (1999), this study was based on ex-post facto. The data for this study was analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis of information presentation.

Analysing the Rising Spate of Insecurity in the South-East Nigeria Through the Hobbesian Lens

The common form of insecurity in the South-East include 'unknown gunmen attacks', ransom kidnapping, robbery attacks, farmer/herder conflicts, agitation of the Igbos in South-East for independence under the platform of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) etc. analysing the violent insecurity and unknown gunmen in the South-East Nigeria through the Hobbesian lens provides insights into the nature of the conflicts and the dynamics at play. Hobbes asserted that in the state of nature, human life is 'solitary, poor, brutish, nasty and short', emphasizing the role of a strong, central authority to maintain order and prevent chaos. The activities of 'unknown gunmen' marked by violence, insecurity, and a breakdown of social order, align with Hobbes' vision of the state of nature. The emergence of 'unknown gunmen' in the South-East can be seen as a manifestation of a perceived lack of effective governance and authority in the region. Hobbes argued that the *Leviathan*, a powerful and centralized authority, is essential to prevent individuals from descending into a state of anarchy (Hobbes, 1651). In the context of South-East Nigeria, the presence

of armed groups operating outside the control of the state suggests a breakdown in the authority's ability to maintain order and security.

Further, the failure of successive governments since 1999, to institute good governance that would secure the socio-economic well-being of the average Nigerian, has resulted to political backlash. In the words of Rufus & Effiong (2017), the political leaders generally viewed to be insensitive to the yearnings of the people for a dignified life. The prevalent of hunger and poverty are enough dangers to challenge the legitimacy of any constituted authority. The two challenges, hunger and poverty, in particular, have been complicated by the growing youth unemployment as well as the systemic denial of the right type of education to some other underprivileged members of the nation. The attendant frustration has given rise to further insecurity which is manifested in the violent sectarian clashes, ethnic strife, rising case of assassinations as well as kidnappings for ransom. This development tends to justify the theory that:

State weakness and poor governance, particularly the state's failure to manage natural resources exploitation effectively and equitably, also strongly influence the opportunity for and feasibility for rebellion as it affects the relative strength of the state being challenged (Development and Cooperation, 2003:443 in Adeniran, 2013).

The activities of 'unknown gunmen in South-East can be interpreted as individuals seeking self-help mechanisms, a concept central to Hobbesian thought on the state of nature. Rufus & Effiong (2017) noted that the prevalence of conflict, crisis, rancour, social disorder, brutality, man's inhumanity to man, and the existential fear of insecurity are greatly unabated. Amidst all these, poverty, and indiscriminate spread of diseases looms large, depicting this setting in the dark. One cannot but say, that the Nigerian malady is immensely conspicuous; it is nothing, but one calling for urgent remedial attention. To them further, the sad situation we find ourselves is as a result of the government lacking legitimacy. Election results in Nigeria do not reflect the will of the people, but the choice of the elite class. Elections which were supposed to be the hallmark of every democracy is hijacked and thus the government of the day most often times struggle for legitimacy. The tendency of political actors to use violence in the electoral process is defined by the state's capacity to enforce law and order. Sadly, the capacity of Nigerian state to enforce law and order is undermined by the erosion of the state's monopoly of the use of violence. The state's monopoly of the use of violence in Nigeria is gravely challenged by the activities of 'cult gangs', 'area boys', 'ethnic militias' unlicensed vigilante groups, and armed bandits that operate in rural and urban areas (Adewale 2005, Pratten 2006, and Fourchard 2008).

It is imperative to note that the rising insecurity in the South-East going by the Hobbesian social contract theory is because of the weakness of the Nigerian state in terms of the monopoly of the use of violence; as a result, individuals started seeking security through self-help mechanisms thereby resort to arming themselves or supporting armed groups as a means of self-preservation in the absence of effective state protection. The climate of fear induced by insecurity in the South-East disrupts social cohesion, erodes trust, and lead individuals and communities to prioritize self-preservation over collective well-being, reflecting a breakdown in the social contract. The role of the government in any society is

intricately tied to the social contract, a philosophical idea that explores the relationship between the governed and governing authority. In the context of South-East Nigeria, where the activities of unknown gunmen have led to significant security challenges, the role of the government in upholding the social contract becomes particularly pertinent. The response from the government to the activities of unknown gunmen can be analysed through the Hobbesian lens, emphasizing the role of the state as the Leviathan.

Leadership Role and Socio-Economic Perspective of Insecurity in South-East

Evidently, for the goal of any country or region to be achieved, one of the necessary conditions is the availability of an effective and focused leadership. It is an obvious fact that no country or region rises above its leadership. Good leadership is a necessary pre-requisite for security, peace and order. For instance, in his work, 'The Trouble with Nigeria (1983), Achebe analysed the solemn vow made by two of our leaders then: Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. In a solemn vow made by Azikiwe in 1937 he pledged:

Evidently, for the goal of any country or region to be achieved, one of the necessary conditions is the availability of an effective and focused leadership. It is an obvious fact that no country or region rises above its leadership. Good leadership is a necessary pre-requisite for security, peace and order. For instance, in his work, 'The Trouble with Nigeria (1983), Achebe analysed the solemn vow made by two of our leaders then: Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. In a solemn vow made by Azikiwe in 1937 he pledged:

That henceforth I shall utilize my earned income to secure my enjoyment of a high standard of living and also to give a helping hand to the needy.

Obafemi Awolowo was even more forthright about his ambitions:

I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally invulnerable, to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria

Achebe observed that 'thoughts such as these are more likely to produce aggressive millionaires than selfless leaders of their people'. Nigeria has always had the misfortune of falling into the hands of rapacious power megalomaniacs as leaders, who owing to sheer incompetence and selfishness, are incapable of satisfying the yearning and aspiration of the people (Udegbunam, 2026).

Insecurity in Nigeria's South-East is a result of leadership failures and socio-economic factors like poverty, unemployment, and perceived marginalization. This has created a cycle where weak governance erodes the social contract, leading to economic decline and further instability, as seen in disrupted businesses, forced migration, and a collapse of trust in government. Leadership responses have included increased security spending and surveillance, but a multi-sectoral approach addressing root causes is needed.

Be that as it may, Egeonu (2006) noted that Nigeria is one of the potentially richest nations in the world, endowed with almost all conceivable important minerals on earth. With good weather and climate, lush tropical vegetation, abundant human resources, arable agricultural land and absence of natural disasters, Nigeria is about the luckiest nation in the world. It is not an exaggeration to state that Nigeria's untapped natural resources, put together, surpass that of the whole continent of Europe. Yet our leaders who preside over this nature's paradise have not been able to use all these to

transform the nation and place it on the part of growth, development and among the civilized nation of the world. Honestly, with all the above, one cannot but agree with Achebe (1983:1) that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.

A perceived government failure to protect citizens and provide basic services has broken the social contract, with citizens feeling abandoned and resorting to self-help measures. It is a popular opinion that the South-East leaders have not done much to curb insecurity and improve the standard of living of their people. The Punch, November 13th 2022 tagged it 'South-East governors' half-hearted fight against insecurity. According to Nwagbo and Ofoke (2025), the security concerns of the region took a worrisome dimension in April 2016 when armed Fulani herdsman invaded the rural town of Ukpabi, Nimbo in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area of the state murdered and maimed many villagers in protest of denial of access to their farmland and reserved forest to feed their herds. The mayhem spread to others parts of the region with new dimension of abduction, kidnapping, raping etc. That made the South-East Governors' Forum to order that bushes along the expressways be cleared to give clear views to motorists and enhance operations of the security officers. This decision of clearing the bushes along the expressways was described as mere palliatives and not a panacea to the rampaging kidnappers and unknown gunmen (Olapaju & Adeniyi, 2022).

In a bid to tackle the monster of the multi-dimensional insecurity in the region, Governors of the South-East formed a regional security outfit called Ebubeagu. Though the community security system lacked coordination and control. This made it possible for the central security outfit to bear different names in different states of the South-East. Abia state has homeland security. In Anambra state, it is called Anambra Vigilante services (AVS), later in the year 2024, they launched another outfit system called 'Agunchemba' under the security outfit of Udo-Gachi, in Enugu, it is called Forest Guard/Neighbourhood Watch, in Imo State and Ebonyi, it is called Ebubeagu. These security outfits are unorganized and not united, no operational manual, poor training, poor synergy and control by dominant control by the state governors and not effective in tackling the multi-dimensional insecurity in the South-East. Above efforts of addressing the insecurity in the region using local security outfit could not yield positive results. Owing to that, the Punch, November 13th, 2022 noted that the South-East Governors Forum after their meeting in Enugu in 2022, issued a communique, decried the state of insecurity in the South-East. In their words, 'our economic activities have been halted, while kidnapping and killings have been on daily increase. The Governors pleaded with the Federal Government to come to the aid of the region in providing security.

It is important to note that before Ebubeagu in the region, Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), had set up the Eastern Security Network (ESN), which he maintained is the only solution to the persistent insecurity in the South-East; blaming the failure of the South-East governors and leaders to addressing security challenges of the region as it concerns kidnappers, bandits, activities of the unknown gunmen, killings by herders etc. within the region.

The economic consequences of insecurity in the region according to Ukwu at el. (2024) have been severe. Poverty rates have surged, climbing from 35% in 2017 to 58% in 2023, driven by the destruction of farms and businesses, which has left many

households unable to meet basic needs. States like Ebonyi and Enugu have experienced severe hardships, with rural communities repeatedly attacked, resulting in increased poverty and disrupted agricultural productivity. For example, cassava output dropped from 300,000 metric tons in 2018 to 180,000 metric tons in 2023. Fear of violence has also deterred investment, contributing to a 40% decline in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the South-East compared to other regions. The region has also borne significant human costs, with over 1,200 lives lost and property worth \$ 200 billion destroyed between 2020 and 2023. Herders' attacks in communities like Eha-Amufu and Uzo-Uwani have caused 40% loss in harvests and destroyed 70% of livestock, further compounding food insecurity. Education has similarly suffered, with school closures in conflict-prone areas like Orlu and Awka, disrupting learning for thousands of children and undermining future human capital development.

Upon all the efforts by the government, individuals and groups and resources put in place to curb insecurity in the South-East region, the monster persisted. Despite the claim by the police and the state government hatched plans to stop the activities of unknown gunmen, more than 15 police formations, including INEC offices, had been burnt. The dreadful unknown gunmen attack especially between 2020-2022, police and army checkpoints and barracks, kill officers and go scot-free. The governors of Enugu and Anambra states Bar. Peter Mbah and Prof. Chukwuma Soludo respectively argued that atrocities of unknown gunmen and rise in insecurity are getting unabated due to compliance of the citizens to sit-at-home order of the non-state actors. They went further to order schools, markets, motor parks, hotels, banks, and public servants, to start business and work on Mondays. This was geared towards downplaying the popularity and seemed domination of the non-state actors (IPOB and unknown gunmen). Unfortunately, this has caused an escalation of fear, tension, and insecurity in the states as unknown gunmen attacked soft points. The security situation especially in Anambra has gone worse as a result of the Governors order. Fears and tensions relaxing in places like Nnewi, Onitsha, and Ekwulobia got aggravated (Nwagbo and Ofoke, 2025).

Even when the security operatives especially the military and police have increased the number of location operations, military bases, and checkpoints/roadblocks in the South-East to curb insecurity and eventually end insurgent and banditry activities in the region. Nwagbo and Ofoke (2025) avers that the effectiveness of these approaches has been questioned considering the level of escalation so far. The military launched about four operations in the Southeast zone from 2016-2024 which include operation Python Dance I, II and III and Udo ka Nma. Emelife and Ofurum (2024) argue that these operations have contributed to the escalation of violence, and increased militarization of civilian areas. More than 200 military checkpoints have been established in the region. The operations of the military officials have made the zone the most militarized in Nigeria even when bigger security challenges and terrorism are experienced in other parts of Nigeria. The perceived militarization hampered the expected civil support from the citizens, rather, they criticized them and yielded their support to the non-state actors. In their analysis, Emelife and Ofurum assert that citizens often encounter a checkpoint every 5-10 kilometres on the major high way leading to delay, harassment, extortions loss of business hours and appointments. They stated that it has been established that about #100 billion is paid illegally through extortion to the security personnel in the region annually at the various checkpoints. Even amidst their presence, kidnapping

has continued unabated on the Southeast roads and over #1.8 billion has been paid as ransom in 120 incidents in the first quarter of 2024.

The security situation in South-East Nigeria in 2025 remains highly volatile, marked violence from various non-state actors and ongoing human rights concerns related to security force operations. These include attacks by 'unknown gunmen', the continued activities of separatist groups like IPOB/ESN, and serious human rights abuses such as unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests, and torture by security operatives. This has created a climate of fear, increased insecurity for residents, and has had broader impacts like disruptions to the economy and increased food insecurity in some areas in the region.

Conclusion

The role of the government in any society is intricately tied to the social contract, a philosophical idea that explores the relationship between the governed and governing authority. For Hobbes therefore, the origin of the formation of the state which he referred to as the commonwealth is a consequence of the people's inability to rely indefinitely on their individual powers to secure livelihood and contentment. Insecurity in South-East Nigeria is a result of leadership failures and socio-economic factors like poverty, unemployment, and perceived marginalization. This has created a cycle where weak governance erodes the social contract, leading to economic decline and further instability, as seen in disrupted businesses, forced migration, and a collapse of trust in government. The above situation and narratives in the South-East Nigeria concerning the activities of unknown gunmen and the socio-economic implications of insecurity, going by the Hobbesian social contract theory underscores the implicit agreement between citizens and the state, where the government is tasked with ensuring order, security and welfare of the citizens in exchange for the support and compliance of individuals in social contract (legitimacy). The persistence insecurity in the South-East indicates a severe breakdown of this social contract, eroding public trust and undermining governance. This breakdown is clearly evident, for instance, the IPOB-enforced sit-at-home orders have slashed business and industrial productivity by 11-16%, resulting in business losses exceeding #11 billion weekly. This inability of the government to protect social and economic opportunities undermines the peoples support to the government i.e. legitimacy, further destabilizing social fabric in the region.

Recommendations

Based on the research, analysis and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made:

The government should put sincerer efforts at policy level to guarantee the security and stability of the South-East by fighting the surge in violence and insecurity perpetrated by unknown gunmen. The prevalence of 'unknown gunmen', often associated with criminal activities, insurgency, or separatist movements, points to a breakdown in the social contract within the South-East Nigeria. In Hobbesian terms, the South-East Nigeria might be perceived as experiencing a state of nature, where the absence of a strong, legitimate authority results in insecurity, conflict, and a general lack of order. One way to solving this problem is by creating a synergy between the desire for security in the masses and the desire for power in the rulers so as to guarantee a state where the social contract is upholding and adequately enforced.

This will make it possible for moral obligations in the end to be derived from the state, since the state and force behind it are the only power that holds society together. The people should always be eager to withdraw their consent whenever the government fails in her own obligation as the case in the South-East Nigeria presently by withdrawing their legitimacy and questioning the ability of the state in keeping with the contract.

Second, South-East Governors should connect the three pillars of development: Leaders, academic class and entrepreneurs. In a bid to solving the problem of insecurity, there is the need for a sectoral approach that integrates efforts across and enables interactions among these three classes, including agricultural and health sectors. In the South-East, there is disconnect between these pillars of development. Partnership between them is a necessary prerequisite for achieving a solid lasting solution to the multi-dimensional security challenges in the South-East. By prioritizing these critical areas, the region can rebuild its socio-economic foundation, reduce tensions, and pave the way for a more stable and prosperous future. Their primary aim should be to formulate the South-East development policies, rekindle and manage abandoned natural endowments in the region and discover talents. This would enable the governors to jointly rekindle the giant establishment like the Nigerian cement company (Nigercem) in Nkalagu, the present Ebonyi state, and create laudable employment opportunities for many talented youths in the South-East. The resources are still there as nature does not give and take, the South-East need to tap from its talents which are embedded in their youths, no nation develops without tapping from its talents. This will enhance unity of purpose in the region and aid in achieving security stable climate, this will incite a stable economic environment where foreigners and even those in diaspora can come back to invest.

Third, there is the need for government to imbibe a psychological approach to the security challenges in the South-East. The people is central here, i.e. their yearning and aspirations should be looked into. Let the leaders look inwardly in what is happening in South-East and handle it internally. The youth is central in curbing insecurity, win their heart, seek for what are their problems, empower them and insecurity would be a thing of the past. For instance, militarization of South-East is not the solution to the security threats in the region, the more militarize a society, the more terrorize the society. The military should go back to the barrack. Because of insecurity, many business opportunities are being lost including agricultural opportunities, and so are the values the businesses would have created in reshaping our society. The South-East governors should come together with unity of purpose to proffer solution to the security challenges in the region. This is because security is development and development is security. The security challenges in the region can be tackled inwardly.

Fourth, South-East regional conference that would re-establish the social contract theory and seek the consent of the people to the contract is imperative. The people, who are the most important party to the social contract theory should be allowed to exercise their right of the contract by holding the rulers accountable. While the government on the other end of the agreement should wake up face their responsibilities squarely, by guaranteeing security and order in the region, addressing challenges in education and employment. Safe learning environment, vocational training to displace the youth, and job creation will aid in ensuring stability in

South-East and reduce to the barest minimum, the likelihood of youth involvement in criminal activities.

Finally, there is an urgent need for the South-East governors to form a codified regional security outfit, with the same nomenclature in all the states in the region. They should be equipped with good and unbiased operational manual, there should also be a synergy and connect between the regional security outfit in various states in the region. Trained and refined youths should be recruited into the security outfit. Subjecting the refined boys to the Department of State Services (D.S.S) scrutiny is pertinent, to avoid recruiting reverend fathers in the day and hoodlums in the night. Functional and more sophisticated Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), cameras and other surveillance devices that detect and record activities should be installed in both strategic and remote part of the South-East so as to enable security operatives closely monitor and get intelligent reports on the activities of armed criminals which would enhance swift response of the security operatives in the case of attack by the unknown gunmen. This would help the region to escape from the weaponization of fear; let us know who is who, and turn the region to something more civil. When the security outfit is very well financed, practically, those hoodlums in the bush must be forced to come out and join the vigilante groups.

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