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Does the Nigerian Government's Response to Violent Conflict Exacerbate Civilians' Fear?

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Abstract

Since the early 2010s Boko Haram, an Islamist militant insurgency group, has wreaked havoc on Nigeria. While Boko Haram itself has been the source of the conflict, the Nigerian government's poor response has failed to alleviate and has even exacerbated the situation. The government's security forces have indiscriminately killed civilians, particularly targeting those with similar demographic characteristics to insurgents. This discussion causes me to raise two questions. First, does the Nigerian government's response to violent conflict exacerbate fear among citizens not affiliated with Boko Haram? And second, do civilians with certain demographic characteristics experience more fear of the military than other groups? My results allow me to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that non-Muslims experience greater fear after insurgent events while Muslims experience greater fear after state repression events.

Introduction

"In the past, people were afraid of the military much more than Boko Haram because of the kind of destruction and brutality they caused whenever they got to the scene where the [Boko Haram] boys had committed their dastardly act. This was worsened by the fact that the military was suspicious of the civilians, seeing them as conspirators" – Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) interview in the Adamawa state (Dietrich 2015, 28)

Over the past decade, Nigeria has been submerged in violent conflict caused by Boko Haram, one of Africa's largest Islamist insurgency groups. Most famous for its kidnapping of more than 250 schoolgirls from Chibok in northern Nigeria in April 2014, Boko Haram has produced one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. As of the end of 2020, the conflict has resulted in the deaths of nearly 350,000 people, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Reuters 2021). Additionally, if the conflict continues into 2030, more than 1.1 million people could end up dead (Reuters 2021).

On the surface, Boko Haram appears to be the primary cause of violence and chaos, but a closer look reveals that the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram may be almost as bad as Boko Haram itself. For instance, after a Boko Haram attack in March 2014 on Giwa Barracks, there were credible allegations that government security personnel detained and killed up to a thousand people without a trial. According to a senator representing Maiduguri, the capital of the Borno State in northeastern Nigeria, 95 percent were innocent and had no connections to Boko Haram (Campbell 2014, 14). Anecdotal evidence also shows Nigerian security agencies have killed as many civilians as Boko Haram during certain periods. For example, Amnesty International released a report stating that more than 950 people died in military custody during the first six months of 2013.

Based on the government's violent response to Boko Haram, there is reason to believe that the civilian population is not just afraid of Boko Haram, but the military as well. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that groups of civilians that are frequently wrongly accused of being Boko Haram combatants or sympathizers may even fear the Nigerian military more than insurgents. If people are victimized by state security forces more than insurgents, we should expect the source of fear to shift from insurgents to the military.

This discussion raises two questions. First, does the Nigerian government's response to violent conflict exacerbate fear among citizens not affiliated with Boko Haram? And second, do civilians with certain demographic characteristics experience more fear of the military than other groups?

To answer the two questions raised above, I look at insurgent events and state repression events, and then measure the fear levels that correspond with each type of event. I aim to see if one source of fear dominates the other. I divide my respondents into non-Muslims and Muslims. I make this division because religion is a central identifying factor for Boko Haram insurgents, and civilians who identify as Muslim may wrongfully be perceived as Boko Haram sympathizers. I use survey measures in response to security questions to evaluate fear. Overall, I postulate that civilians who have typically been victims of insurgents will experience more fear of insurgency, and those who have typically been the victims of state security forces will experience more fear of state repression. My results allow me to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that non-Muslims experience greater fear after insurgent events while Muslims experience greater fear after state repression events.

Does violent government repression do more bad than good?

Nigeria has a long history of using repression to address conflict dating before Boko Haram's founding. During the country's Civil War in the late 1960s, Niger Delta militants often used repressive tactics and arbitrary force to respond to dissent (Ike, Antonopoulos, & Singh 2022). Boko Haram's rise has only increased the government's use of repression. After Boko Haram attacks, security forces have killed men in front of their families, stolen money while searching homes, and burned houses (Ike, Antonopoulos, & Singh 2022).

In cases of ongoing conflict, we see that some efforts to limit violence and chaos may lead to higher victimization and civilian fear. While addressing issues governments perceive as threatening political systems, government personnel, the economy, or the lives, beliefs, and livelihoods of those in their territorial jurisdiction, they commonly rely on repression. Though repression can address conflict to a degree, it can lead to significant collateral damage and target civilians in circumstances where the original perpetrators of violence may be hard to identify. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, governments used a repressive approach—known as mano dura—to prevent crime and supposedly improve public security in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mano dura failed to yield successful results, but since the criminals were difficult to find, the government targeted almost all people with similar demographic characteristics to known criminals, violating the rights of many young people, especially poor black males (Muggah 2018). Examples like this cause us to question whether repressive government action equates to safety and security for all. The failures of aggressive government responses to internal conflict and crises suggest the need to further investigate their impact on civilians.

Does repression effectively reduce terrorism and quell civilian fear?

Scholars have argued that repression should reduce terrorism because it raises the cost of participating in terrorist activity. Repression reduces the opportunities for terrorist movements to form and conduct attacks and claim credit via the media (Piazza 2015, 102). If the repression-terrorist theory is true, areas with high levels of repression should be inhospitable to terrorists and leave fewer opportunities for dissent. Hence, those who fear terrorists should experience less fear overall.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram targets those it believes to be influenced by or support Westernization, meaning that those identifying as Christian or non-Muslims are more likely to be Boko Haram victims. Boko Haram has made numerous statements against Christianity, including that it aims to "'liberate [themselves] and [their] religion from the hands of infidels and the Nigerian government' as part of a 'full scale war between the Muslims and the Christians'" (Human Rights Watch 2012, 45). According to the Human Rights Watch, between June 7, 2011, and January 2012, 142 Christians were killed. However, it is important to note that Boko Haram also targets Muslims it believes to be un-Islamic or not Islamic enough (Nijoku 2020, 1). Overall, non-Muslims may experience reduced fear in circumstances of increased government repression because they may feel their chances of being victims of a Boko Haram attack decrease.

Nigeria-specific literature addressing how governments use excessive force in times of conflict causes us to question if repression improves civilians' safety and reduces their fears of violence. The Nigerian government is well-known for gross human rights violations, including summary executions and arbitrary detentions (Human Rights Watch, 2022). For instance, Nigerian security forces have harmed and often killed civilians in their war on terror in the Sahel, an area in northeastern Nigeria, as well as tried to capture aid and prohibit relief organizations

from entering areas to control insurgents (Lind, Mutahi, & Oosterom 2017, 121). Meanwhile, Down and Drury note that when looking at successful military action in Nigeria against Boko Haram, civilians experience increased violence (Dowd & Drury 2017, 145). Literature outlining how governments fight conflict, and more specifically how the Nigerian government approaches conflict, shows us that forceful approaches may exacerbate violence, making civilians feel more fearful.

Are some groups of civilians more likely to be victimized by government repression?

When countries use repression to address conflict certain civilians are often victimized more than others. In the case of insurgencies, governments often target civilians with similar demographic characteristics to the insurgents. For example, Kenya's response to Al-Shabaab, an Islamic fundamentalist Salafi jihadist group in East Africa, has increased the country's internal tensions. The Kenyan government has focused on policing Muslim communities and removing individuals who are in the country illegally (Lind, Mutahi, & Oosterom 2017, 118). Kenyan security forces have been accused of assassinations and forceful disappearances of Muslims not associated with Al-Shabaab. Somali and Muslim leaders have likened operations conducted by Kenyan security forces to 'state-led profiling of the Kenya-Somali community.' Hence, groups with similar demographic characteristics insurgents may be fearful of their government's response to terrorist groups.

There are several reasons why governments may target specific groups while addressing violent conflict. First, it is extraordinarily difficult to differentiate between insurgents and civilians. As one member of the Nigerian security forces in Gombe explained, "An important thing to note is that there is nothing on the face of a member of Boko Haram to identify him… It

is true some innocent civilians have found themselves locked up or tortured due to no fault of their own" (Dietrich 2015, 6). Scholars like Stathis Kalyvas and Lisa Blaydes have provided evidence for the indiscriminate persecution of civilians. Kalyvas argues that states use blanket violence more frequently than selective targeting because it is the cheapest option when little is known about the actual insurgents (Kalyvas 2004). Blaydes argues that "culturally distanced" communities are inherently harder to monitor, so they are targeted more frequently by security forces (Blaydes 2018). Second, governments may believe certain groups are likely to be sympathizers or become terrorists. Since Boko Haram is an Islamist insurgency group, security forces are most concerned about the radicalization of the Muslim community (Lewis 2006, 85). Third, repression of certain demographic groups is often representative of communal cultural clashes. Although Islam and Christianity are both indigenous religions in Nigeria, they frequently fight over values, access to resources, and political power (Yusuf 2010, 237). The government's targeting of Muslims could be a part of a larger battle between Muslims and Christians.

Why should we measure fear levels?

Few pieces of literature investigate the impact of Nigeria's response to Boko Haram on fear. However, established literature explains fear has important consequences. First, fear and anxiety can influence political decision-making and impact the choices people make on topics beyond the source of their fear. Emotions, in general, impact how individuals seek and process information about their surroundings and various issues they face (Webster & Albertson 2022). For instance, fear and anxiety may result in decreased political participation and increased risk aversion (Wagner & Morisi 2019). Furthermore, fear can have health and economic implications.

People with high levels of fear often have poorer mental health, reduced physical functioning, and a lower quality of life (Stafford, Chandola, & Marmot 2007). Additionally, people exposed to violence are likely to have decreased economic risk preferences causing them to have worse economic outcomes (Callen, Isaqzadeh, Long, & Sprenger 2014, 146). The consequences of fear are serious and potentially harmful to a country's population, which is why I have made it the focus of my research.

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses flow from this discussion about citizen fear in states beset by civil conflict.

The first hypothesis is that the general population should report fear from both insurgent and state repression events:

General population hypothesis: On average, respondents in Nigeria will report more fear after both insurgency and state repression events.

The other hypotheses will test my expectation that civilian group identity shapes who and which type of violence civilians fear after a violent event.

My second hypothesis focuses on the reactions of members of groups that are typically victimized by insurgents:

Non-Muslim hypothesis: Non-Muslims in Nigeria will report more fear after insurgency events.

My third hypothesis focuses on the reactions of groups that are typically victimized by the state after insurgent attacks:

Muslim hypothesis: Muslims in Nigeria will report more fear after state repression

events.

I expect the effect of fear of repression and insurgency to depend on the religious identity of the respondent. I also anticipate that those who fear victimization by insurgents will feel less fear of repression and more fear of insurgency. Meanwhile, those who fear victimization by the state will feel more fear of repression and less fear of insurgency.

Data Collection and Research Methodology

To test my hypotheses, I ran a series of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models, drawings on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Afrobarometer. ACLED compiles location, dates, actors, and deaths from reported violence and protests in each of Nigeria's six geopolitical regions. Afrobarometer collects responses to questions on safety and security, rights and freedoms, supply of democracy, system legitimacy, personal economic conditions, energy and infrastructure, health, education, social services, group identity, gender, and governance.

The data from Afrobarometer is representative of the national adult population, meaning that it contains respondents with a range of ages, employment statuses, education, religion, and political affiliation. The average respondent in Nigeria's seventh survey wave in 2017 is 33 years old, is Christian or Muslim, has completed secondary education, and has no political affiliation.

ACLED codes violent events from national and international sources, including the news media, vetted social media accounts, government and NGO reports, and partner organizations. I coded the data from ACLED into violent insurgent events and state repression events. Violent events are marked as insurgent if the perpetrator was Boko Haram or an affiliated Islamist insurgency group. Events are marked as government repression if the perpetrator was the

Nigerian military or Nigerian police forces and the victims were civilians. About 9% of all the ACLED events within five years of the 2017 Nigeria Afrobarometer survey (i.e, 2012-2022) are coded as violent insurgent events, and 2% are coded as state repression, using these criteria.

Figure 1 provides a map of the location of all respondents, marked with a black "X" in relation to violent insurgent events and state repression events from the ACLED database.

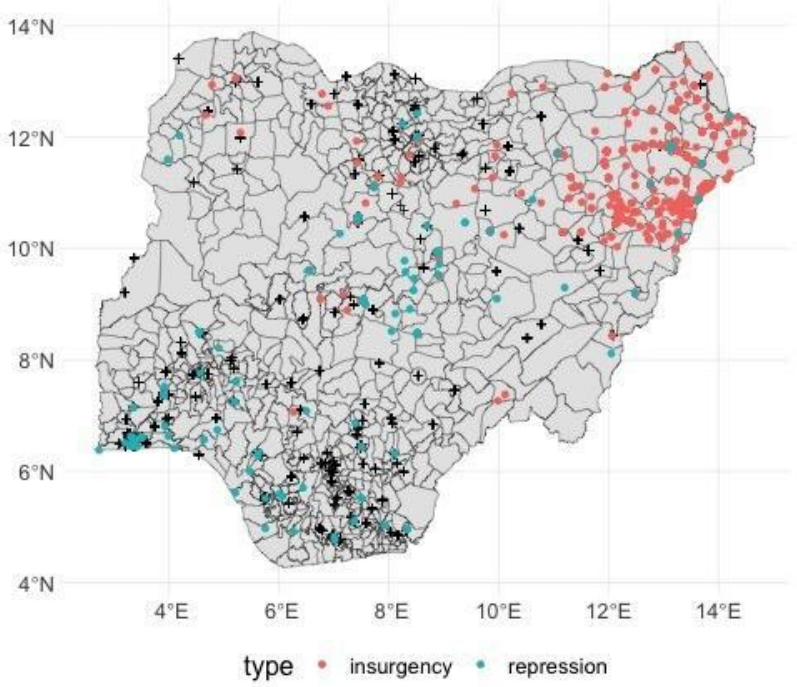

FIGURE 1: DATA MAP

Throughout the analysis, the dependent variable of my research is a measure of fear. To measure "Fear," I create a battery measure that consists of the mean of each respondent's answer to five questions (shown in table 1). "Fear" is an upwards measure, meaning that a lower score indicates less fear, and a higher score indicates more fear. I chose general measures of fear that would not be obviously influenced after an insurgent or repression event. (See appendix for responses to individual fear battery questions.)

Fear Battery Questions
In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?
In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do people have to be careful about what political organizations they join?
Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighborhood?
Have you ever personally feared any of the following types of violence? [If yes] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years? Violence among people in your neighborhood or village
Are the following things worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same? Your personal safety from crime and violence

The central independent variables in my research are violent state repression events or Boko Haram insurgency attacks. The independent variables are measured as the number of repression or insurgent events within 5 years of 2017 (i.e, 2012-2022) and a 100-kilometer radius of each respondent.

I also divide my respondents into two groups, Muslims and non-Muslims, to determine if some groups are more vulnerable to fear from insurgent or state victimization.

For the first regression model, if respondents in Nigeria report more fear after both insurgency and state repression events, then the coefficient on fear should be positive and statistically significant. For the second regression model, if non-Muslims report more fear after insurgency events, then the coefficient on fear should be positive and statistically significant. And for the third regression model, if Muslims report more fear after state repression events, then the coefficient on fear should be positive and statistically significant. If my results are in line with my predictions, that would indicate that those targeted by government security forces continue to experience high levels of fear despite government conflict intervention.

Results

The results of my regressions offer strong support for all three hypotheses, revealing a significant disparity between the sources of fear for Muslims and non-Muslims.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	1.56***	1.49***	1.33***
	(0.04)	(0.09)	(0.10)
Insurgency events (5 yr period)	0.06*	0.10***	0.11***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Repression events (5 yr period)	0.14***	0.10*	0.09*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Age		0.00	0.00*
		(0.00)	(0.00)
Women		0.01	0.03
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Education		0.01	−0.00
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Muslim		−0.11***	−0.09**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Unemployed, but looking		0.08*	0.08*
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Employed part-time		0.12**	0.11**
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Employed full-time		−0.02	−0.01
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Poverty score			0.05
			(0.03)
Informativeness score			0.06**
			(0.02)
R^2	0.01	0.03	0.04
Adj. R^2	0.01	0.03	0.04
Num. obs.	1590	1443	1443

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 1: Results for general population

First, I report the results of the regressions run on the general population in Table 1. Model 1, which does not include any controls, shows a statistically significant and positive relationship between fear and insurgency with a coefficient of 0.06. That means that Nigerians in the Afrobarometer who live within 100 km of at least one insurgent event that occurred within five years of 2017 are 0.06 points higher on average on a five-point scale consisting of the five fear battery questions. In addition, there is a statistically significant and positive relationship

between fear and repression with a coefficient of 0.14. This means that Nigerians in the Afrobarometer who live within 100 km of at least one repression event that occurred within five years of 2017 are 0.14 points higher on average on a five-point fear scale. These results support my first hypothesis, respondents in Nigeria will report more fear after both insurgency and state repression events. Additionally, these results indicate a larger effect of repression on fear than insurgency. Models 2 and 3 add more controls, revealing that fear levels are also tied to other variables like employment, poverty, and informativeness, and that the correlation between exposure to violence and fear remains similar in magnitude and statistically significant after controlling for these possible confounding variables. Models 2 and 3 also indicate that those who do not identify as Muslims report higher levels of fear in general.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	1.66***	1.65***	1.44***
	(0.08)	(0.14)	(0.15)
Insurgency events (5 yr period)	0.17***	0.18***	0.19***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Repression events (5 yr period)	0.05	0.03	0.04
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Age		0.00	0.00
		(0.00)	(0.00)
Women		−0.04	−0.02
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Education		0.01	0.00
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Employment		0.00	0.00
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Poverty score			0.08*
			(0.03)
Informativeness score			0.04*
			(0.02)
R^2	0.02	0.02	0.04
Adj. R^2	0.02	0.02	0.03
Num. obs.	918	809	809

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2: Results for non-Muslims only

Second, I report the results of regressions run on non-Muslims only in Table 2. I look at

only non-Muslims in these regression models because I suspect they will not experience fear of repression but will experience fear of insurgency. These results are different from the general population. Most respondents who do not identify as Muslim identify as Christian. Model 1, which does not contain any controls, shows a statistically significant and positive relationship between fear and insurgency with a coefficient of 0.18. This means that non-Muslims in the Afrobarometer who live within 100 km of at least one insurgent event that occurred within five years of 2017 are 0.18 points higher on average on a five-point fear scale. A statistically significant relationship does not exist between fear and repression. A statistically significant and positive relationship between fear and insurgency and no significant relationship between fear and repression persists across Models 2 and 3 with more controls. These results support my second hypothesis, non-Muslims in Nigeria will report more fear after insurgency events.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	1.53***	1.37***	1.29***
	(0.05)	(0.11)	(0.13)
Insurgency events (5 yr period)	0.04	0.04	0.05
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Repression evens (5 yr period)	0.14**	0.15**	0.14**
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Age		0.00	0.00
		(0.00)	(0.00)
Women		0.06	0.07
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Education		0.00	−0.01
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Employment status		−0.00	−0.00
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Poverty score			0.02
			(0.04)
Informativeness.score			0.07**
			(0.03)
R^2	0.01	0.02	0.03
Adj. R^2	0.01	0.01	0.02
Num. obs.	672	634	634

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 3: Results for Muslims only

Third, I report the results of regressions run on Muslims only in Table 3. I look at only Muslims in these regression models because I suspect they will not experience fear of insurgency but will experience fear of repression. These results are different from the general population and non-Muslims. Model 1, which contains no controls, shows a statistically significant and positive relationship between fear and repression with a coefficient of 0.13. This means that Muslims in the Afrobarometer who live within 100 km of at least one insurgent event that occurred within five years of 2017 are 0.13 points higher on average on a five-point fear scale. A statistically significant relationship does not exist between fear and insurgency. A statistically significant and positive relationship between fear and insurgency and no significant relationship between fear and repression persists across Models 2 and 3 with more controls. These results support my third hypothesis, Muslims in Nigeria will report more fear after state repression events.

Robustness Checks and Possible Threats to Results

To ensure the accuracy of my results, I check that Muslims and non-Muslims were exposed to both repression and insurgent events. If one group was disproportionately exposed to one type of violence, they would naturally fear that type of violence more. After graphing Muslims' and non-Muslims' exposure to insurgent and repression events, I find they are fairly equally exposed to both events (refer to figures 2 and 3 in the appendix). This means that exposure to events will not have influenced my results. I do note that although reporting of repressive events occurring in non-Muslims and Muslims areas appears evenly distributed (figure 2), there is no indication that repressive events occurring in non-Muslims areas negatively impact non- Muslims to the same degree as Muslims. Nonetheless, this relatively equal exposure to repressive events affirms my hypothesis that Muslims remain more fearful of state repression.

I also check the fear battery distribution between Muslims and non-Muslims. If one group is significantly more fearful than the other, that could impact my results. I find that both Muslims and non-Muslims have relatively normal fear distributions (refer to figure 4 in the appendix). However, Muslims have a fear distribution skewed a little left, meaning that they are generally less afraid than non-Muslims. The results of the distribution match the results of my regressions. Since one group is not significantly more afraid than the other, a fear bias should not disrupt my results.

Finally, I use controls to check the robustness of my results. Regardless of the controls added, my results stand. Insurgency impacts fear levels for non-Muslims more than age, gender, education, employment status, poverty, or informativeness. And repression impacts fear levels for Muslims more than age, gender, education, employment status, poverty, or informativeness.

Discussion and Conclusion

My findings indicate that the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram fails to make all civilians feel safe and exacerbates fear for Muslims. Non-Muslims fear insurgency events more, and Muslims fear state repression events more. Such a poor military and governmental response has drastic consequences and should cause the country to reevaluate its fight against terrorism. The goal of the Nigerian government should be to make all civilians feel safer while reducing Boko Haram's threat.

My results make multiple contributions to existing literature. First, literature on public opinion and state repression has argued that there is strong civilian support for harsh responses to violence. For instance, literature on Mano dura has tried to explain its popularity given its failures. My findings serve as a reminder that governments should not treat citizens as

homogeneous when reacting to identity-based conflicts. Some civilians may feel safer from harsh responses to conflict, but that is not synonymous with all civilians feeling safer. Second, my research indicates that state repression is not well-targeted, and disenfranchised civilians often face the brunt of repression after insurgency events. Scholars like Stathis Kalyvas and Lisa Blaydes have argued that states use indiscriminate violence when they have little information about the perpetrators of insurgent events. My results support their arguments, showing that those with vaguely similar demographic characteristics of known insurgents, regardless of culpability, are targeted more frequently than the general population.

Since the Nigerian government's response to terrorism causes fear for all populations and is a greater source of fear for Muslims than insurgency, we can suspect that civilians generally foster distrust of their military. Decreased trust in the military can spread distrust to other areas of the Nigerian government and influence how people respond to government action. Ironically, following this logic, the Nigerian military could also be reducing their chances of preventing future Boko Haram attacks by reducing trust in the government. If people are fearful of their government and military, they may refuse to give critical information that could prevent future attacks. If my analysis is correct, the distrust and fear fostered by the military could be causing a cycle of Boko Haram violence followed by military violence.

Unfortunately, Nigeria is plagued with many other types of violence beyond that caused by the Boko Haram conflict. Nigeria is submerged in political violence, militia activity, and inter-communal clashes. Future research could investigate if the results of my research on fear of insurgency and state repression apply to other conflicts.

My analysis suggests that the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram is causing fear among its civilian population. A government's primary responsibility is to protect its

citizens from harm, whether that be external or internal. Since the general population reports fear of state repression and the Muslim population reports more fear of repression than insurgency, the government and military should overhaul how they address violent conflict.

Appendix

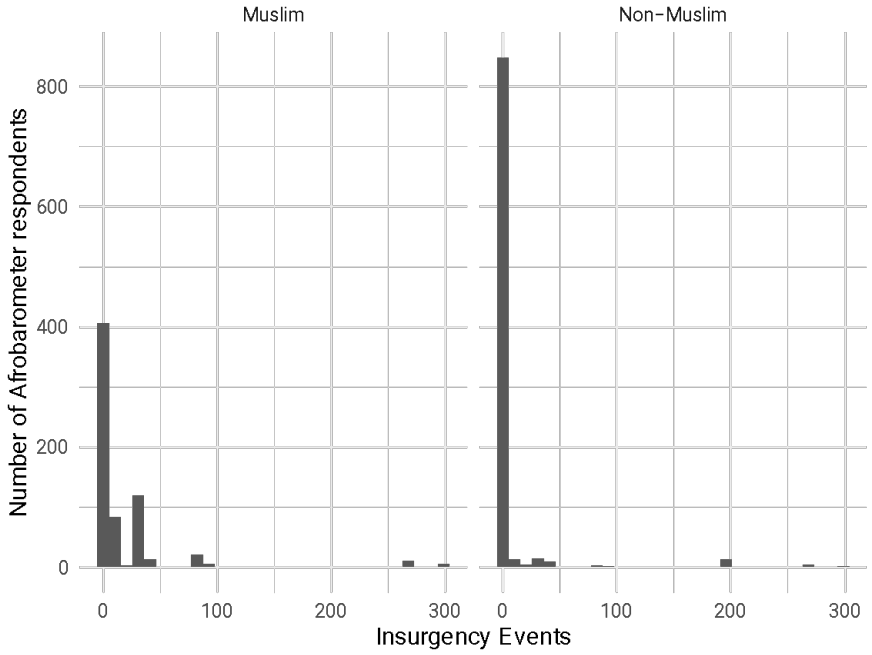

FIGURE 2: Insurgent Event Distribution

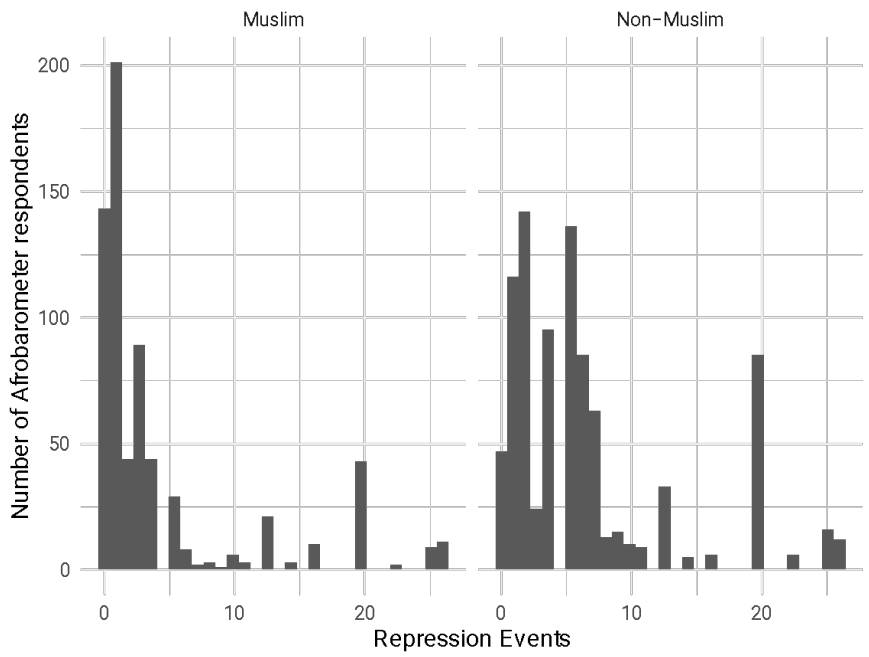

FIGURE 3: Repression Event Distribution

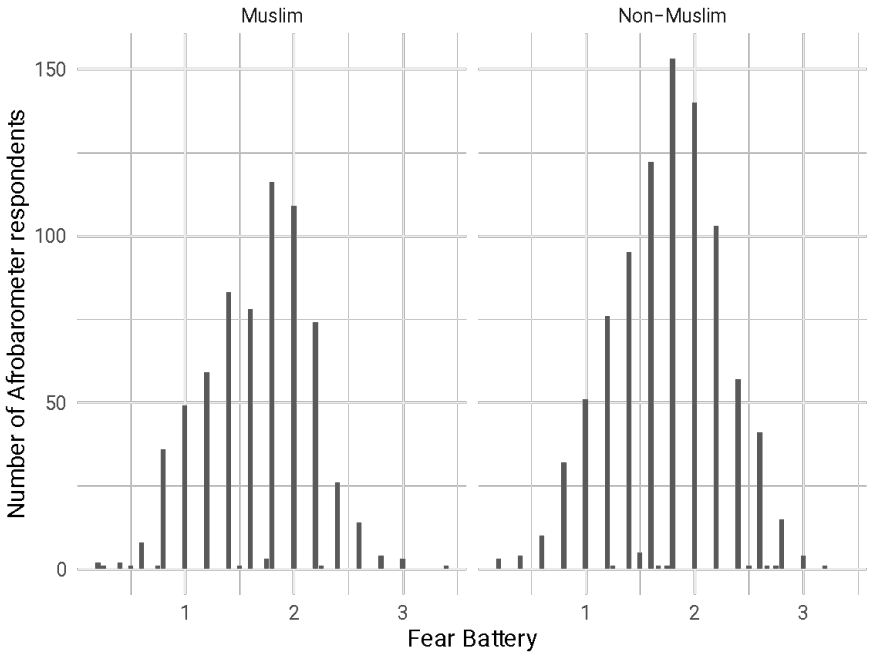

FIGURE 4: Fear Battery Distribution

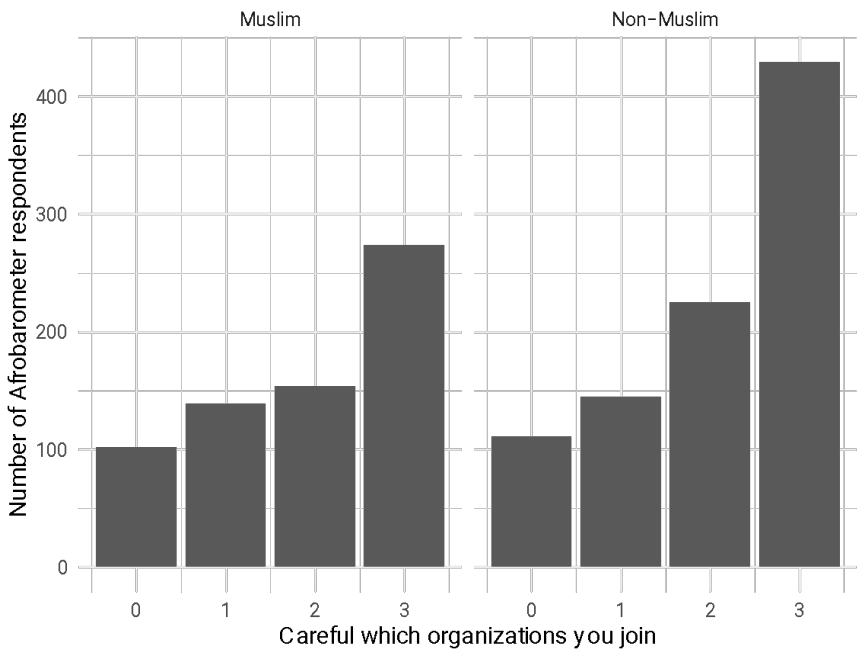

FIGURE 5: Fear Distribution (Careful which organization you join)

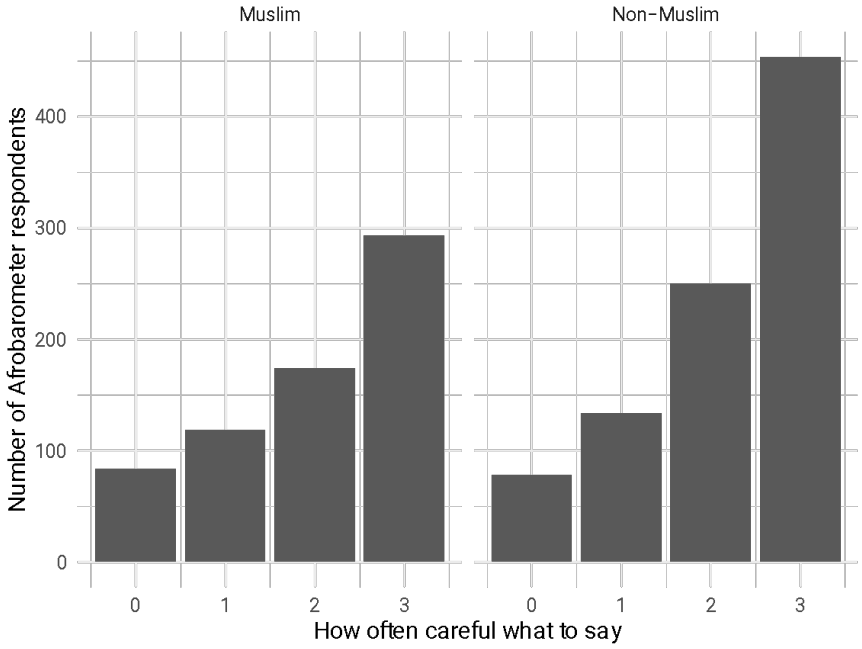

FIGURE 6: Fear Distribution (How often careful what to say)

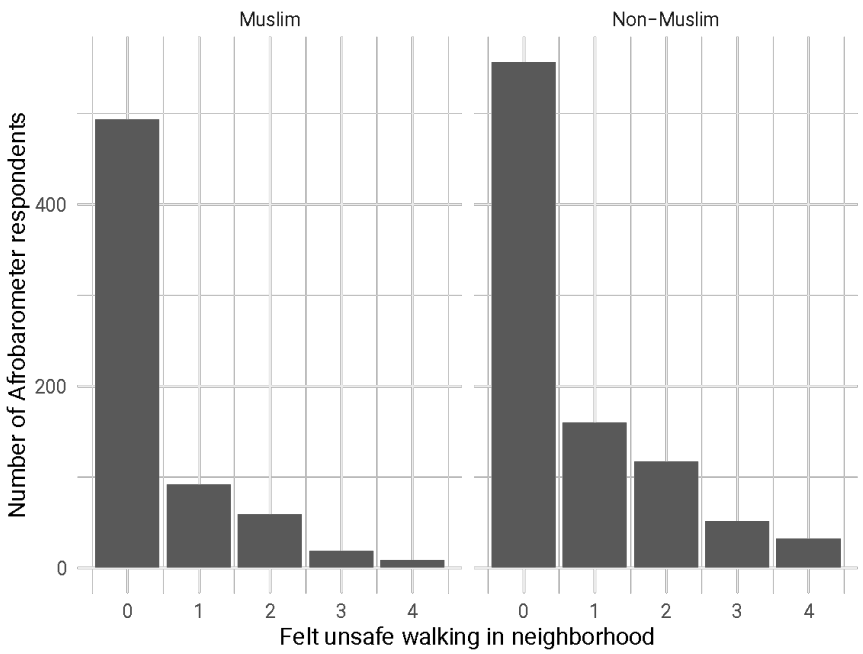

FIGURE 7: Fear Distribution (Felt unsafe walking in neighborhood)

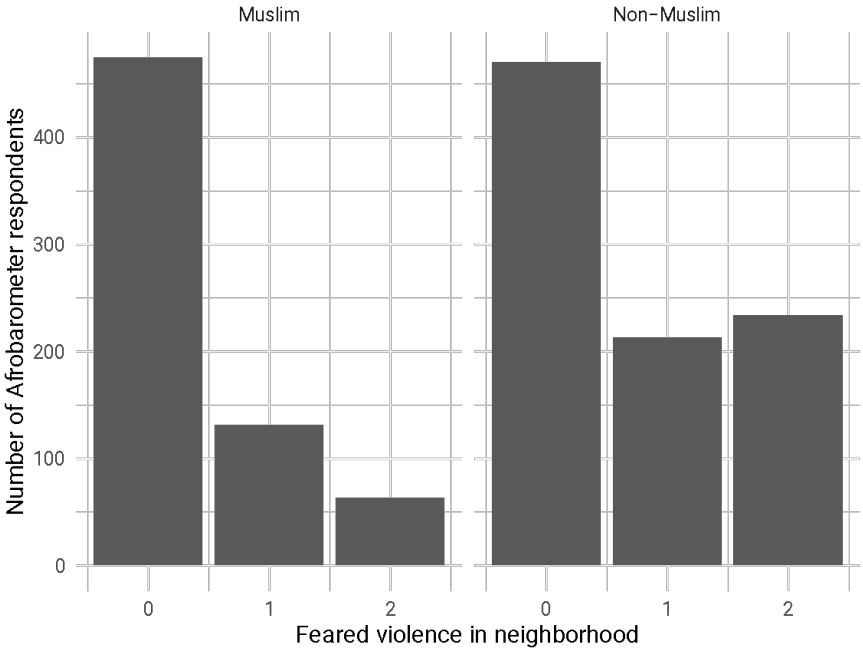

FIGURE 8: Fear Distribution (Feared violence in neighborhood)

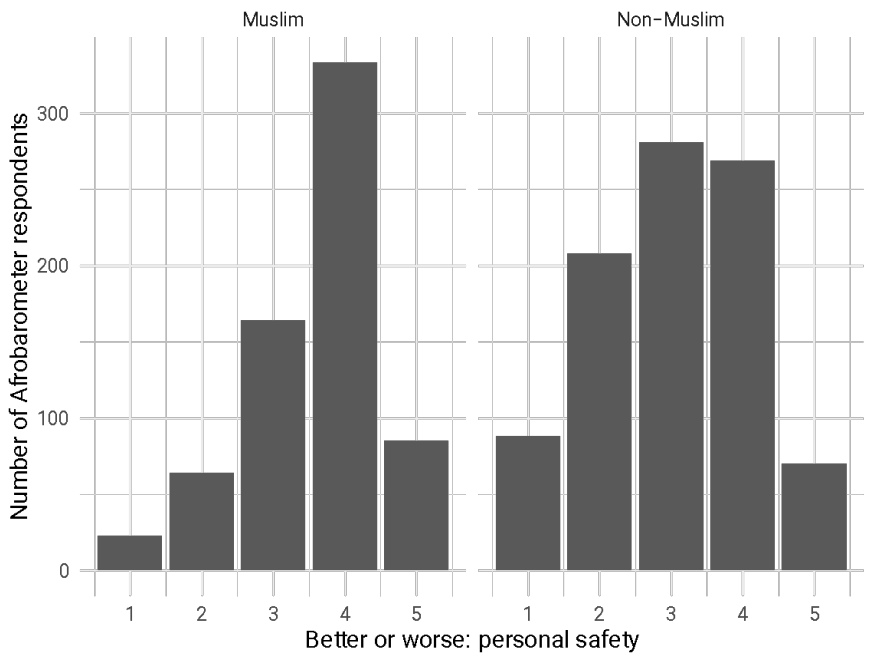

FIGURE 9: Fear Distribution (Better or worse: personal safety)

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