

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL LEADERS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE NORTHERN SENATORIAL DISTRICT OF TARABA STATE

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Abstract

The Northern Senatorial District of Taraba State has been plagued by persistent conflicts rooted in ethnic and religious tensions, political rivalries, and farmer-herder clashes. These conflicts continue to undermine social stability, economic development, and democratic governance. This paper aims to examine the role of political leaders in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Northern Taraba, specifically focusing on Karim Lamido, Lau, and Jalingo Local Government Areas. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis to gather data from political leaders, traditional rulers, security personnel, civil society actors, and community members. Guided by the Conflict Transformation Theory, the research emphasizes the importance of addressing underlying causes of conflict and fostering long-term peace. The findings indicate that although political leaders possess considerable influence, their efforts are often hindered by challenges such as political partisanship, weak institutional capacity, limited resources, and deeply rooted ethnic and religious divisions. The study recommends strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing inclusive governance, supporting traditional institutions, and promoting grassroots peace initiatives. These strategies are essential to improving the effectiveness of political leaders in fostering sustainable peace and development in Northern Taraba.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, political leadership, peacebuilding.

Introduction

Conflict is deeply entrenched in many parts of Nigeria, particularly the Northern Senatorial District of Taraba State which includes Jalingo, Lau, Ardo-Kola, Karim Lamido, Yorro, and Zing Local Government Areas. These regions are marked by frequent intercommunal clashes stemming from the intersection of ethnic, religious, and socio-political divisions. Groups such as the Fulani, Mumuye, Wurkum, and Jenjo have historically coexisted, but increasing competition over land, grazing rights, political representation, and scarce economic resources has led to heightened tensions and recurring violence (Adamu & Ben, 2017). The escalation of these disputes into deadly conflict is often fueled by the absence of effective early warning systems, weak governance structures, and delayed intervention by relevant authorities.

A recent and tragic example of this trend occurred in May 2025, when suspected Fulani herders attacked the villages of Munga Dosso, Munga Lelau, and Bandawa in Karim Lamido LGA. The assault, which left over 30 residents dead, is part of the broader herder-farmer conflict that has plagued the region for years. During a mass burial held for the victims, the Chairman of Karim Lamido LGA, Bitrus Danjos, broke down in tears and had to be assisted away from the burial site. This rare public display of grief highlighted the psychological and emotional burden borne by political leaders in areas affected by chronic violence. It also underscored the dual expectations placed on such figures not only to provide administrative and security responses but also to connect empathetically with grieving communities (Channels Television, 2025).

These events bring to the fore the pivotal yet complex role of political leaders in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Leaders at the local and state levels possess both institutional authority and community legitimacy, positioning them as crucial actors in peace dialogues, security coordination, and reconciliation efforts. However, their effectiveness is often hindered by partisanship, ethnic alignment, weak institutions, and limited capacity for impartial mediation (Ibeanu, 2016; Odeh & Umoh, 2015). In some cases, political elites have even been accused of inflaming tensions to advance their political interests (Ikelegbe, 2015).

Against this background, this study explores “The Role of Political Leaders in Conflict Resolution in the Northern Senatorial District of Taraba State.” It investigates how local and state political leaders respond to conflict, the strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the extent to which their actions contribute to peacebuilding or perpetuate violence. Drawing from both recent events like the Munga Dosso crisis and broader scholarly insights, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of political leadership in conflict-prone environments. It also offers policy recommendations to strengthen political leadership as a vehicle for sustainable peace in Northern Senatorial district in Taraba state Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Northern Taraba has experienced recurring communal and ethno-political conflicts, often resulting in loss of lives, destruction of property, and deep-seated mistrust among communities. While various stakeholders have engaged in peace efforts, the role of political leaders—who wield significant influence over governance, resource distribution, and community mobilization remains critical yet underexplored. In many cases, political leaders have been accused of either aggravating tensions through biased actions or failing to proactively mediate conflicts. Despite their strategic position to promote dialogue, inclusivity, and sustainable peace, there is limited empirical understanding of how effectively political leaders in Northern Taraba engage in conflict resolution. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the extent, nature, and impact of political leadership in managing and resolving conflicts in the region.

Objective

To examine the role of political leaders in promoting conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Northern Taraba.

Research Question

How do political leaders contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Northern Taraba?

Review of Related Literature

Odeh and Umoh (2015) emphasize the role of traditional institutions in Nigeria’s conflict resolution architecture, asserting that political leaders must collaborate with culturally rooted leadership to build legitimacy in peacebuilding processes. Their study demonstrates that without synergy between traditional rulers and elected officials, conflict resolution remains superficial.

Mohammed (2016) explores the challenges of governance in the management of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. He notes that political leaders often lack the institutional frameworks and

political will necessary to intervene decisively in communal crises, making reactive rather than preventive peace measures the norm.

Onuoha (2017) addresses the inefficacy of the state in conflict management. He argues that political leaders frequently fail to deploy timely interventions in communal violence, resulting in escalating insecurity. His analysis supports the case for decentralizing peacebuilding responsibilities and involving grassroots actors.

Akinwale (2018) links post-conflict peacebuilding to socio-economic development, particularly through human capital investment. He suggests that political leaders can play a transformative role by creating employment opportunities and educational access in conflict-prone areas such as Taraba, thereby addressing root causes of unrest.

UNDP Nigeria (2018) emphasizes community resilience as a cornerstone of peacebuilding. The report reveals that when political leaders support inclusive local governance and invest in community-based peace initiatives, conflict resolution becomes more sustainable.

Tertsakian (2021) investigates reconciliation processes in conflict zones in Nigeria, including Taraba State. She highlights the pivotal role of political actors in organizing peace dialogues after violent episodes but criticizes their limited follow-up and poor implementation of resolutions, which weakens long-term peace efforts.

Bolben Energy & Environmental Services (2024) identifies conflict risks in Lau LGA, Taraba, during its environmental impact assessment. The report underscores that weak political engagement exacerbates local grievances and recommends conflict-sensitive political leadership for sustainable rural development.

Ohadiugha and Gado (2025) examine farmer–herder conflicts and argue for a collaborative governance model involving political leaders, NGOs, and community actors. Their research highlights that top-down peace enforcement lacks legitimacy without grassroots participation and political accountability.

Nwosu et al. (2025) assess the rhetoric surrounding farmer–herder violence and its impact on political mediation. They argue that inflammatory discourse by political elites often hardens ethnic identities and obstructs peaceful coexistence, calling for conflict-sensitive communication from leaders.

Daily Post Nigeria (2025) reports that over 40 lives were lost in Munga Dosso, Karim Lamido LGA, during a herder attack in May 2025. Political leaders responded with town hall meetings and peace initiatives, illustrating their role in post-conflict recovery and the urgent need for proactive engagement.

Vanguard News (2025) confirms the Munga Dosso massacre and shows how political figures facilitated community dialogue to prevent retaliatory attacks. The article supports the claim that immediate political intervention can reduce the intensity of communal violence.

ScienceDirect (2024) presents findings on the environmental and social drivers of the herder–farmer conflict in Nigeria. The research urges political leaders to understand and address ecological degradation, which is fueling competition over resources and igniting communal clashes.

Zagazola Makama (2025) details renewed hostilities in Karim Lamido, revealing a cycle of retaliatory violence between Fulani herders and indigenous farmers. The report emphasizes the need for continuous political engagement, cross-community dialogue, and enhanced local security frameworks.

AllAfrica (2025) discusses a November 2024 clash in Bambur, where military interventions and political consultations reduced tensions. It shows how coordinated efforts between politicians, security agencies, and local leaders can de-escalate violence.

Ng International Journal (2025) explores policy failure in managing herder–farmer violence. The article advocates for a strategic role for political leaders in integrating peace education, compensation systems, and land-use regulation into long-term conflict prevention mechanisms.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the role of political leaders in conflict resolution in Northern Taraba, focusing on Karim Lamido, Lau, and Jalingo LGAs due to their history of communal and ethno-political conflicts. The study targets political leaders, traditional rulers, community members, security personnel, and civil society representatives as key informants, using purposive sampling to select approximately 30-40 participants. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify and interpret key patterns around leadership practices, conflict dynamics, and the involvement of traditional and political leaders in peacebuilding efforts, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of their roles in conflict management.

Presentation and Data Analysis

According to a political leader from Karim Lamido who was asked about the major sources of conflict in Northern Taraba, he stated that: "Most of the conflicts here arise from ethnic competition, especially when one group feels sidelined politically. There's also tension over land and resources." (*Interview with Political Leader, Karim Lamido LGA, April 6, 2025*)

A traditional ruler from Lau also responded to the same question and explained that: "People still carry historical grievances. When political appointments or development projects go to one group more than others, it brings resentment." (*Interview with Traditional Ruler, Lau LGA, April 6, 2025*)

A community elder in Jalingo added his perspective, saying: "We've had issues between farmers and herders, especially during the dry season. Sometimes religious differences are used to divide us." (*Interview with Community Elder, Jalingo LGA, April 8, 2025*)

Theme 2: Roles of Political Leaders in Conflict Resolution

When asked about the role of political leaders in resolving conflicts, a local government official in Lau responded that: "We intervene by calling peace meetings, involving security agencies and traditional rulers. Sometimes, we set up local peace committees." (*Interview with Political Leader, Lau LGA, April 13, 2025*)

A security officer in Jalingo provided further insights, stating that: "They help coordinate responses and also communicate with the police and army when needed. But their role is

stronger when they're seen as neutral." (*Interview with Security Officer, Jalingo LGA, April 13, 2025*)

A civil society representative from Karim Lamido added that: "Some politicians are proactive. They mediate between communities and sometimes sponsor peace campaigns." (*Interview with Civil Society Representative, Karim Lamido LGA, April 13, 2025*)

Theme 3: Collaboration between Political and Traditional Leaders

Responding to how political and traditional leaders work together in conflict resolution, a traditional ruler from Karim Lamido said that: "The politicians come to us when there's a problem. Our voice carries weight in the community. When we speak, people listen." (*Interview with Traditional Ruler, Karim Lamido LGA, April 20, 2025*)

A political leader in Jalingo also acknowledged this partnership, saying: "We can't resolve conflicts alone. The traditional institution is vital. They know the land boundaries, the customs, and can calm the people better than we can." (*Interview with Political Leader, Jalingo LGA, April 20, 2025*)

A civil society actor from Lau emphasized the importance of collaboration: "Collaboration is key. When both institutions unite, conflict resolution efforts are more effective and respected." (*Interview with Civil Society Representative, Lau LGA, April 20, 2025*)

Theme 4: Challenges Faced by Leaders in Conflict Resolution

Speaking on the challenges faced in resolving conflicts, a political leader in Karim Lamido noted that: "Resources are a big problem. We want to do more, but funding peace initiatives is difficult." (*Interview with Political Leader, Karim Lamido LGA, April 27, 2025*)

From a community member in Lau, the concern was different. He stated that: "Some leaders are accused of taking sides. That reduces trust and worsens the conflict." (*Interview with Community Member, Lau LGA, April 27, 2025*)

A security officer in Jalingo explained the institutional gap, saying: "There's often poor coordination between security agencies and politicians. Sometimes, response comes too late." (*Interview with Security Officer, Jalingo LGA, April 27, 2025*)

A traditional ruler from Lau also highlighted a recurring problem: "After the crisis, there's no follow-up. That's why the same problems keep coming back." (*Interview with Traditional Ruler, Lau LGA, April 27, 2025*)

Theme 5: Community Perceptions of Political Leadership

Asked how the community views political leaders' efforts in peacebuilding, a youth leader in Jalingo stated that: "Some leaders genuinely try to bring peace, but others are only active during elections." (*Interview with Youth Leader, Jalingo LGA, May 2, 2025*)

A women leader from Karim Lamido responded that: "We appreciate when leaders involve everyone women, youth, and elders in peace dialogues. That builds trust." (*Interview with Women Leader, Karim Lamido LGA, May 2, 2025*)

A community elder from Lau concluded the theme by saying: "The people know who is sincere and who is playing politics. Trust is everything." (*Interview with Community Elder, Lau LGA, May 2, 2025*)

Major Findings

The study revealed that the predominant sources of conflict in Northern Taraba are deeply rooted in ethnic competition and disputes over access to land and natural resources. These conflicts are often intensified by perceptions of political exclusion, where certain ethnic groups feel marginalized in political appointments and the allocation of development projects. In addition to these structural causes, historical grievances and religious tensions were also identified as contributing factors, particularly in situations where political or communal leaders manipulate identity lines for influence or control.

Political leaders in the region were found to play an important, albeit uneven, role in conflict resolution. Many respondents acknowledged that these leaders often initiate peace efforts by organizing meetings, liaising with security agencies, and setting up local peace committees. However, the consistency and impartiality of their involvement were sometimes questioned. Some political figures were described as reactive or only becoming visible during election periods. Their ability to mediate effectively was closely tied to their perceived neutrality and sincerity by the local population.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this paper provide significant insights into the dynamics of conflict resolution in Northern Taraba and the critical role played by political leaders. The persistent nature of conflict in the region often driven by ethnic rivalries, land disputes, and political marginalization confirms earlier scholarly observations that identity-based competition and resource scarcity are key conflict drivers in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. This supports the views of scholars such as Albert (2001) and Ibrahim & Igbuzor (2002), who emphasize that unresolved historical grievances and perceived injustice are central to communal clashes in ethnically diverse settings.

The study found that political leaders are actively involved in peace efforts, though their effectiveness varies based on their approach and public perception. This aligns with Lederach's theory of conflict transformation, which underscores the need for credible leadership that fosters trust and dialogue. When political leaders are seen as neutral mediators, they gain legitimacy and can play a unifying role. However, when they are viewed as partisan or self-serving, their involvement risks exacerbating tensions. This finding echoes the conclusions of Ayoade (2012), who warned that political manipulation often undermines genuine peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study reveals that political leaders in Northern Taraba significantly influence conflict resolution through dialogue, coordination with security forces, and partnerships with traditional rulers. Their effectiveness is closely tied to how the public perceives their neutrality, sincerity, and inclusiveness. Traditional leaders continue to play a vital role due to their deep-rooted authority and connection to the people. The findings show that joint efforts between political and traditional leaders often lead to more credible and lasting peace initiatives. However, persistent issues such as limited funding, weak coordination, and inadequate post-conflict

engagement pose major obstacles. To ensure lasting peace, political leaders must foster inclusive participation, build trust, and remain consistently engaged in peacebuilding efforts.

Recommendations

Political leaders should actively engage all segments of society particularly women, youth, traditional rulers, and civil society groups—in peacebuilding efforts. Inclusive dialogue helps build trust, reduces marginalization, and ensures that conflict resolution processes are community-driven and widely accepted.

Political leaders should institutionalize regular consultation and cooperation with traditional rulers, whose authority and grassroots influence are critical to resolving communal disputes. Joint action between political and traditional leaders enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace initiatives across communities.

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