



Elite Conspiracy and Regional Discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria

Njoku, Chinwendu Shedrack & Michael Nwagbo Obiora

Department of Political Science, K.O. Mbadiwe University, Ideato, Imo State

Received: 20.09.2025 | Accepted: 30.09.2025 | Published: 06.10.2025

*Corresponding Author: JNjoku, Chinwendu Shedrack

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17281067](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17281067)

Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper interrogates the nexus between elite conspiracy and regional discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria through the lens of elite theory and the political economy of exclusion. It contends that the persistent marginalization of the South-East within Nigeria's federal structure is not solely the outcome of institutional design flaws or historical contingencies, but is significantly driven by strategic collusion among segments of the national elite—both within and outside the region—to maintain asymmetric power relations. The study conceptualizes elite conspiracy as a form of implicit or explicit coordination among political and economic elites aimed at preserving access to state resources, often at the expense of equitable regional representation. It further examines how intra-regional elite fragmentation in the South-East undermines collective political agency, enabling the consolidation of hegemonic narratives that delegitimize local grievances. These dynamics have intensified perceptions of exclusion and catalyzed the resurgence of separatist movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), thereby threatening national integration. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in elite interviews, secondary data analysis, and historical interpretation, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on federalism, elite politics, and conflict in postcolonial African states. It concludes by advocating for a recalibration of Nigeria's federal architecture and the institutionalization of inclusive governance mechanisms as prerequisites for mitigating regional alienation and restoring democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Elite Politics, Regional Marginalization, Federalism, Separatist Movements, Political Economy of Exclusion.

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

INTRODUCTION

The South-Eastern region of Nigeria, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo, has long been characterized by a complex interplay of political marginalization, perceived elite manipulation, and regional discontent. Central to understanding this dynamic is the notion of "elite conspiracy", a belief that the political elite, whether regional or national, collude to maintain power and suppress the interests of ordinary citizens. At the national level, scholars and commentators argue that Nigeria's political elite, from presidents to legislators, function as a conspiratorial alliance that subverts popular welfare in favor of their own dominance. For instance, Sote (2022) contends that "elite consensus in Nigeria is actually an elite conspiracy against the interest of the poor masses," with constitutional provisions often weaponized to preserve elite privilege and weaken social justice efforts (Sote, 2022). Similarly, discussions in *The Cable* portray elite political leadership as committed to destabilizing the nation through calculated mismanagement, describing a

so-called mission: "Destroy Nigeria" (Kolawole, 2016).

Regionally, in the South-East, such sentiments are intensified by persistent feelings of exclusion and injustice. Political exclusion has long fueled Igbo grievances—stemming from the civil war era and continuing through modern underrepresentation in national governance and federal postings (Osimen et al., 2025). Relative deprivation theory helps explain how these perceptions of inequality (e.g., lack of political voice or resources) can ignite collective unrest when groups compare themselves unfavorably to others (Gurr, 1993; Crosby, 1976 cited in Osimen et al., 2025).

In contemporary times, this dynamic is mirrored in the controversy over the "unknown gunmen" operating in the region. While the Nigerian government attributes these attacks to IPOB/ESN militants, many Igbo elite perceive the narrative as a false-flag designed to portray the Igbo as violent and incapable, thereby undermining their political aspirations—such as producing a Nigerian president



(Nweje, 2021; Ezeife et al., cited in Osimen et al., 2025). Moreover, the perception that regional elites engage in conspiratorial behavior extends to youth disenchantment. Ashiekwene (2021) highlights how the manipulation of party positions and election rigging, driven by unscrupulous leaders, contributes to destabilization and community violence in the South-East (Ashiekwene, 2021). Taken together, these observations suggest a feedback loop: national-level elite manipulation reinforces regional grievances, while local elite conspiracies amplify regional discontent. In South-Eastern Nigeria, this cycle manifests through perceived political marginalization, security crises, and growing disillusionment among both elites and the masses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the “elite” has long intrigued political scientists, sociologists, and historians who seek to understand the nature of power, social stratification, and governance. Elites are commonly defined as a small group of individuals who hold disproportionate power, influence, and resources in a given society. Despite variations in definitions, most scholars agree that elites occupy pivotal roles in decision-making processes and are key drivers of societal direction. Foundational theorists such as Gaetano Mosca, C. Wright Mills, and Tom Bottomore provide varying but complementary frameworks that help to conceptualize the nature and role of elites. This essay explores these perspectives while analyzing the defining characteristics of elites and their implications for governance and society.

Gaetano Mosca (1939), in his seminal work *The Ruling Class*, posits that elites are an organized minority that rules over a disorganized majority. According to Mosca, the inevitability of elite rule stems from the basic organizational necessities of governance. Because the majority of people are unorganized and politically inactive, a minority that is more organized, resourced, and cohesive inevitably comes to dominate public life. This ruling minority possesses the knowledge, skills, and institutional access that allows it to govern efficiently. For Mosca, elite rule is not an aberration but a structural necessity for the functioning of complex societies.

C. Wright Mills (1956) extends this understanding in his analysis of the “power elite.” He argues that modern democracies, particularly the United States, are not truly governed by the masses, but rather by a triad of powerful institutions: the military, the economy, and the political system. The individuals who occupy leadership positions in these sectors form a cohesive elite whose decisions shape the trajectory of society. Mills challenges the idea of pluralism and democratic accountability by highlighting the structural integration of power at the top. He notes that elites are not merely individual actors but are embedded within institutions that sustain and reproduce their dominance. This “power elite” governs in ways that often align with its own interests, frequently at the expense of broader democratic engagement (Mills, 1956).

Tom Bottomore (1993), on the other hand, broadens the scope of elite theory by incorporating not only political and

economic actors but also cultural and intellectual elites. He defines elites as those in the highest social strata, distinguished by their authority, wealth, or prestige. Bottomore emphasizes that elites play critical roles in shaping societal values and norms, and their influence extends beyond formal governance into realms such as academia, religion, and the arts. He also distinguishes between ruling elites and non-ruling elites, acknowledging that not all elite groups hold direct political power but may still significantly influence public discourse and policy through their social capital.

Several defining characteristics distinguish elites from the general population. First and foremost is their control over scarce resources. According to Scott (2008), these resources may be material—such as wealth, land, or capital; institutional—such as political authority or military power; or symbolic—such as prestige, knowledge, or cultural legitimacy. This multifaceted control enables elites to shape not only policy outcomes but also public perception and societal norms.

Second, elites possess access to exclusive networks that facilitate the reproduction of their power and status. These networks often include elite educational institutions, private clubs, corporate boardrooms, and political circles. Through these connections, elites maintain social cohesion, ensure intergenerational continuity, and often collaborate across sectors to consolidate influence (Scott, 2008).

Third, elites tend to be relatively cohesive, maintaining solidarity in the face of potential threats to their dominance. This internal cohesion can manifest in shared interests, values, and a collective desire to preserve privilege. However, cohesion does not preclude internal competition. As Bottomore (1993) notes, elite groups may experience internal rivalries as individuals or factions vie for greater dominance, particularly during periods of political or economic transition.

Finally, elites are disproportionately represented in decision-making processes. Whether in government, corporate leadership, media, or academia, elites often occupy key positions where critical decisions are made. Their overrepresentation means that public policies and societal directions often reflect elite interests more than those of the general populace. This dynamic challenges the democratic ideal of equal representation and raises important questions about accountability and legitimacy in governance.

The dominance of elites has significant implications for the functioning of democratic institutions. While elite leadership may contribute to administrative efficiency and continuity, it also risks alienating the general population from meaningful political participation. Mills (1956) warns that when elites are insulated from the public and operate with little transparency, democracy becomes a façade rather than a functioning system of popular governance. Moreover, the ability of elites to shape cultural narratives and public opinion underscores their influence beyond traditional political spheres. Intellectual and cultural elites, as highlighted by Bottomore (1993),

play an essential role in legitimizing elite rule by producing ideologies that justify existing power structures. This ideological control can obscure structural inequalities and hinder grassroots movements seeking reform.

Nevertheless, elite theory does not necessarily imply a static or monolithic power structure. Elite circulation—the process by which new individuals or groups ascend into elite positions—can introduce diversity and change. However, as Mosca (1939) notes, even in systems that promote meritocracy or electoral turnover, new elites often resemble the old in terms of values, background, and interests, thus limiting transformative potential.

The concept of elites therefore remains central to understanding power dynamics in modern societies. Theoretical frameworks offered by Mosca, Mills, and Bottomore highlight the persistent and multifaceted nature of elite rule. While elites may differ in composition and function, they share common characteristics: control over resources, access to exclusive networks, relative cohesiveness, and a central role in decision-making. These features allow elites to shape societal trajectories, often reinforcing their dominance. As such, elite theory provides a critical lens through which to examine the challenges of democratic governance, social mobility, and equitable representation in contemporary society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The persistence of regional discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria is deeply intertwined with perceptions of elite conspiracy and political exclusion. Elite theory offers a valuable lens through which to examine how a relatively small, coordinated group of actors maintains dominance and how this dynamic contributes to disaffection among the Igbo people and other Southeastern communities. Drawing on both theoretical underpinnings and empirical contexts—such as neo-Biafran agitations and governance exclusion—this essay explores how elite power structures aggravate regional grievances in South-Eastern Nigeria.

Evidence of elite conspiracy is observed in local government administration, where political elites—including governors and bureaucrats—have undermined constitutional mandates, manipulated electoral processes, and diverted federal allocations, engendering discontent and disillusionment at the grassroots (Akpomera & Omoyibo, 2014). This concentration of administrative control among a select few betrays foundational elite theory's assertion that elite rule is sustained by an organized, resource-laden minority.

The feeling of exclusion among Igbo populations in the South-East is reinforced by long-standing underrepresentation in national governance. Studies show that the Igbo frequently feel marginalized in top federal appointments and structural decision-making (Ezeibe, 2013; Walker & Smith, 2002). Similarly, the Minorities Commission (1958) documented a deep sense of grievance among Eastern minorities, who feared Igbo centralization in governance and resource allocation within the Eastern Region (ACCORD). This creates a paradoxical dynamic:

while the Igbo may dominate certain regional structures, they feel excluded from the central elite and federal power circuits, generating a powerful sense of relative deprivation.

Neo-Biafran movements, including IPOB and MASSOB, are prominent expressions of South-Eastern discontent. These separatist agitations are rooted in perceived marginalization and distrust of Nigeria's ruling elite, who are seen as indifferent or repressive (Nwangwu, 2022). State repression—through arrests, military action, and bans—has radicalized formerly non-violent movements, with groups adopting armed resistance, such as the formation of the Eastern Security Network (ESN), in response to elite-inflicted repression (Nwangwu, 2022).

i. Elite Control and Structural Exclusion: Elite theory emphasizes how elites dominate institutions and resources; in Nigeria, this translates to elite manipulation of federal structures to maintain centralized control and limit regional autonomy (Akpomera & Omoyibo, 2014). The Federal Government's centralization of revenue, lack of resource control, and sidelining of Eastern interests reflect a conspiracy by a narrow group to preserve their power, reinforcing regional alienation.

ii. Elite Conspiracy as Perceived Intent: Ideas of elite conspiracy are not only structural but also ideological. As Sote (2022) argues, political elites in Nigeria in concert across office levels—actively perpetuate systems that disadvantage the masses. In South-Eastern Nigeria, this belief spawns from tangible marginalization in resources, power, and inclusion, and it legitimizes separatist aspirations among communities already frustrated by elite dominance.

iii. Mobilization Driven by Relative Deprivation: Relative deprivation theory helps explain how perceived inequality generates mobilization. Among Igbo and South-Eastern communities, comparisons with other regions' political inclusion and development reinforce feelings of deprivation, and elite theory underscores that these feelings arise from exclusion by entrenched power groups (Walker & Smith, 2002; Ezeibe, 2013). Such deprivation fuels support for IPOB and MASSOB, reinforcing the recourse to separatist or radical approaches.

iv. State Repression, Radicalization, and Elite Entrenchment: The response of Nigeria's ruling elites to separatist movements has often included repression—arrest, bans, military force, which, according to Nwangwu (2022), accelerates the militarization of secessionist movements like IPOB's ESN. In elite theory terms, elites embed their authority via coercion, but such force can be counterproductive, radicalizing marginalized groups and perpetuating conflict cycles in which elites inadvertently strengthen radical identity among the South-Eastern populace.

In South-Eastern Nigeria, elite theory illuminates the mechanisms whereby power is monopolized by a few—through strategic exclusion, control of institutions, and coercive responses to dissent. Elite conspiracy is not merely imagined; it is rooted in practices that systemically marginalize Igbo populations from political and economic

parity. Consequently, relative deprivation intensifies, fueling separatist discourse and mobilization. State repression further entrenches resistance, contributing to a feedback loop of discontent and security instability.

Applying elite theory to elite conspiracy and regional discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria reveals the complex interplay between structured exclusion, perceived elite collusion, and reactive mobilization. Governance dominated by a narrow elite breed's alienation among marginalized groups. Perceptions of conspiracy, whether actual or perceived, deepen trust deficits. Mobilization—whether peaceful or armed—is propelled by subjective deprivation and legitimized by structural inequities. Thus, understanding the South-Eastern dynamic demands acknowledgment of how elite dominance and conspiratorial governance shape political behavior and reinforce centrifugal regional tendencies.

Political Effects of Elite Conspiracy on Regional Discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria

Elite conspiracy has spiral political effects in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. These effects include but not limited to the following:

i. Erosion of political trust and legitimacy: Widespread beliefs that “Abuja bargains” are stitched by a small coterie of power brokers—often portrayed as hostile to South-Eastern interests—undermine confidence in national integration projects and distributive mechanisms such as federal character and revenue allocation. Decades of scholarship show how Nigeria's federal design has attempted to balance identities and spread appointments, but also how these measures frequently fall short in practice, fueling a sense of structured exclusion (Mustapha, 2005; Suberu, 2001). When South-Eastern elites are seen as complicit—benefitting personally while delivering little collective gain—the result is not only alienation from the federal center but also disenchantment with state-level officeholders, who are accused of “eating with Abuja” rather than negotiating tangible dividends for their constituents (Joseph, 1987; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Politically, this manifests in declining faith in elections as pathways to redress, softer support for national parties perceived as remote, and the growing appeal of extra-institutional repertoires of action.

ii. Catalysing separatist and protest mobilization: Into this legitimacy vacuum stepped movements that offer a counter-narrative of dignity and protection—most prominently the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The movement's resonance is heightened by the belief that mainstream elites cannot or will not secure fair representation, justice for past atrocities, or equitable development (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Suberu, 2001). Perceived elite complicity also reframes separatism as a defensive project against a captured state. Mobilization surged especially after 2015, with large rallies and media campaigns; the state's coercive response—including the 2017 proscription of IPOB and terrorism designation—further entrenched grievance identities (Premium Times, 2025; Punch, 2018). Amnesty International documented

lethal crackdowns on largely peaceful pro-Biafra gatherings in 2015–2016, deepening the conviction that the political arena is closed to dissenting South-Eastern voices (Amnesty International, 2016a, 2016b). Such episodes convert diffuse complaints about elite collusion into vivid moral injuries, transforming spectators into participants and sympathizers.

iii. Securitization and the feedback loop of violence: A second-order political effect is the normalization of securitization. The federal government's framing of separatism as a terrorism problem and the routine deployment of the military for crowd control move conflict from the realm of negotiation to force (Amnesty International, 2016a; Reuters, 2024). Securitization often empowers hardliners on all sides: it sidelines moderate elites who might broker reforms, incentivizes clandestine organization, and multiplies armed actors. The “sit-at-home” phenomenon, initially a protest tactic to pressure for Nnamdi Kanu's release, became a quasi-institution enforced violently by factions and criminal opportunists, contributing to hundreds of deaths and immense economic losses in the zone (Reuters, 2025). Politically, this reorders authority: non-state actors claim veto power over commerce and civic life on Mondays; local officials appear unable to protect citizens; and state capacity is publicly discredited. Each cycle of coercion validates narratives of elite abandonment and deepens regional discontent.

iv. Distortion of electoral behaviour and civic participation: The interaction of distrust, securitization, and protest has measurable effects on elections and civic life. Pre-election violence and threats against electoral officials reduce turnout, complicate logistics, and fuel doubts about representation—especially when voters believe that elite deals, not ballots, determine outcomes (AP, 2023). Boycotts, strategic abstention, and volatile swings toward outsider candidates reflect a politics of rejection more than programmatic alignment. Civil society energies are diverted toward self-help security, prisoner-of-conscience campaigns, and humanitarian relief for victims of violence, leaving less bandwidth for policy-focused advocacy. The perceived “elite conspiracy” thus hollows out the democratic arena itself, replacing contestation over policy with conflict over recognition and safety.

v. Fragmentation of regional leadership and governance paralysis: A further effect is the fragmentation of South-Eastern leadership. Once elites are depicted as collusive or captured, their social license to govern erodes. Governors and legislators who might otherwise coordinate across party lines for regional projects—security, infrastructure, industrial policy—face accusations of betrayal if they negotiate with Abuja, and accusations of recklessness if they confront it. This reduces the space for pragmatic coalition-building and complicates the execution of regional development initiatives, perpetuating the very socioeconomic conditions that nourish dissent (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Mustapha, 2005). Simultaneously, non-state “enforcers” crowd the governance space, issuing edicts (e.g., sit-at-home) that public authorities struggle to counter, thereby

reconfiguring who wields effective power at street level (Reuters, 2025).

vi. Entrenchment of grievance identities and inter-regional polarization: Finally, the conspiracy frame amplifies inter-regional suspicion: South-Eastern grievances are met by counter-narratives elsewhere that emphasize national security, criminality, or historical recriminations. Mutual stereotyping hardens, making elite pact-making even more opaque and brittle. As classic analyses of Nigerian federalism warn, when distributive and recognition questions are handled through closed bargains instead of transparent, rules-based processes, conflicts shift from negotiable interests to non-negotiable identities (Suberu, 2001; Joseph, 1987). The unresolved status of IPOB's leader, Kanu—marked by repeated bail denials and protracted trials—continues to function as a political lightning rod, sustaining mobilization and polarization (Reuters, 2024, 2025).

Economic Effects of Elite Conspiracy on Regional Discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria

Perceptions of “elite conspiracy” in South-Eastern Nigeria are not confined to the political domain; they have profound economic implications that exacerbate discontent in the region. In this context, “elite conspiracy” refers to the widespread belief that both national and regional elites collude to exclude the South-East from meaningful participation in federal economic structures while simultaneously exploiting the region's resources for personal gain. The resulting economic effects manifest in developmental marginalization, underinvestment in infrastructure, restricted access to federal resources, and the proliferation of informal and illicit economies—all of which reinforce grievances and drive regional discontent..

i. Marginalization in economic distribution and investment: One of the most significant economic consequences of elite conspiracy is the systematic perception of exclusion from federal resource allocation and investment. Despite being an important commercial hub, the South-East lags in critical infrastructure such as road networks, seaports, and power supply compared to other regions (Afigbo, 2005; Suberu, 2001). Federal allocation patterns often reflect political bargaining rather than objective development needs, and elites are accused of striking deals that enrich themselves while neglecting regional development priorities (Joseph, 1987). This sense of economic neglect fuels resentment and validates the narrative that national elites conspire to keep the region underdeveloped, thereby sustaining discontent.

ii. Stunted industrial growth and infrastructural neglect: The South-East is known for its entrepreneurial culture, particularly the manufacturing clusters in Aba, Nnewi, and Onitsha. However, inadequate infrastructure, high energy costs, and the absence of supportive industrial policy have stifled the growth of these local industries (Alike, 2022). Perceived elite complicity—whereby leaders accept token appointments and contracts in lieu of meaningful regional development—further entrenches disillusionment (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This neglect

has ripple effects on employment, productivity, and competitiveness, leaving many youths underemployed and vulnerable to mobilization by separatist movements.

iii. Restricted access to federal economic opportunities: Elite conspiracy is also seen in the distribution of federal contracts, appointments, and oil-derived revenues. Although Nigeria's revenue-sharing formula is designed to address regional imbalances, South-Easterners often perceive themselves as systematically shortchanged in the allocation of economic opportunities (Mustapha, 2005). The underrepresentation of the South-East in key federal economic institutions and decision-making structures contributes to the belief that national elites manipulate economic access to favor other regions (Suberu, 2001). Such patterns foster exclusionary economic nationalism and deepen alienation from the Nigerian state.

iv. Rise of informal and illicit economies: Economic marginalization has driven many South-Eastern communities toward informal and illicit economic activities as alternative survival strategies. From cross-border smuggling along Nigeria's southeastern frontiers to the entrenchment of black-market trade, these activities are often justified by communities as a response to systemic neglect (Ezeoha & Ugwu, 2015). However, the growth of informal economies weakens state legitimacy, reduces taxable revenues, and sustains a cycle where formal economic development is perpetually deferred. Moreover, the state's heavy-handed policing of these economies, often perceived as selective, further reinforces the narrative of economic conspiracy against the region.

v. Youth unemployment and separatist financing: A direct economic effect of elite conspiracy is the rise in youth unemployment, which has reached crisis levels in South-Eastern states (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020). The perception that elites capture resources while offering few jobs or opportunities creates fertile ground for separatist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to recruit unemployed youths (Okeke, 2019). Economic frustration not only fuels mass participation in protests but also indirectly finances agitation, as diaspora remittances—channeled through networks distrustful of state elites—sustain separatist campaigns.

vi. Erosion of social capital and brain drain: Finally, the perception of economic conspiracy has contributed to widespread brain drain from the South-East. Highly skilled professionals migrate abroad or to other Nigerian regions where opportunities seem more accessible. This exodus reduces local human capital, perpetuates underdevelopment, and reinforces the conviction that Nigeria offers no fair economic future for South-Easterners (Afigbo, 2005). The result is both economic stagnation and a deepened sense of grievance against the ruling elite class.

Social Effects of Elite Conspiracy on Regional Discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria

The South-East of Nigeria has long been marked by narratives of marginalization, with perceptions of “elite conspiracy” occupying a central place in the discourse of

discontent. These perceptions suggest that both national and regional elites collude in ways that perpetuate social exclusion, erode trust in institutions, and deepen inequalities across communities. While elite conspiracy is often framed as a political and economic issue, its consequences are equally profound in the social domain. The social effects manifest in eroded social cohesion, intergenerational alienation, and militarization of everyday life, identity polarization, and cultural shifts toward resistance. Together, these outcomes reinforce a cycle of grievance and regional discontent.

i. Erosion of trust and social cohesion: A primary social effect of elite conspiracy is the erosion of trust within communities and between citizens and their leaders. South-Easterners often perceive their political elites as complicit in national schemes that disadvantage the region while enriching a select few (Joseph, 1987). This perception has bred resentment not only toward federal structures but also toward local leaders, who are accused of prioritizing personal gain over collective welfare (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Such mistrust weakens social cohesion and undermines the legitimacy of communal institutions, leaving communities fragmented and vulnerable to conflict.

ii. Intergenerational alienation and youth radicalization: The sense of betrayal by elites particularly affects young people, who face high unemployment, inadequate educational opportunities, and limited prospects for upward mobility. Many youths interpret elite conspiracy as evidence that legitimate pathways to success are blocked, leading them to embrace separatist ideologies and militancy (Okeke, 2019). Movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have gained resonance among younger generations who perceive them as authentic voices of resistance to elite domination (Amnesty International, 2016). The radicalization of youth creates intergenerational alienation, as elders are often seen as either too complicit or too passive to challenge elite structures.

iii. Militarization of everyday life: Another profound social effect is the militarization of daily existence in the South-East. Elite conspiracies are believed to underpin heavy-handed federal security deployments in the region, often resulting in violent clashes between security forces and civilians (Amnesty International, 2016). Routine militarization produces fear, disrupts social life, and normalizes violence as a method of resolving disputes. This has lasting social consequences: schools close during security operations, businesses shutter during “sit-at-home” orders, and families experience displacement. Over time, militarization desensitizes communities to violence, altering social relations and community resilience.

iv. Identity polarization and social exclusion: The perception of elite conspiracy also deepens identity-based polarization. South-Easterners increasingly construct their social identity in opposition to the Nigerian state, emphasizing narratives of exclusion, injustice, and betrayal (Suberu, 2001). Social interactions with other regions are often filtered through mistrust, reducing opportunities for interregional cooperation. This

polarization manifests in everyday discourse, social media, and community mobilization, where young people express solidarity around shared grievances while distancing themselves from national narratives (Ezeibe, 2020). Such polarization reinforces a “we versus them” worldview that sustains discontent.

v. Cultural shifts toward resistance and diaspora activism: Finally, elite conspiracy has fueled cultural shifts that valorize resistance. Songs, art, literature, and digital platforms in the South-East increasingly reflect themes of struggle, marginalization, and Biafra revivalism (Ojukwu & Onuoha, 2016). The South-Eastern diaspora also plays a key role in sustaining these narratives, as remittances and media activism reinforce the idea that survival and dignity require resistance to elite domination (Ezeibe, 2020). These cultural currents consolidate grievance identities across generations and geographies, embedding discontent within the social fabric of the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To dismantle elite conspiracy in South-Eastern Nigeria, there must be a genuine push for inclusive governance and equitable representation at the federal level. One of the root causes of discontent in the region is the perception of systematic exclusion of the Igbo and other South-Eastern groups from power-sharing arrangements and key federal positions. Addressing this imbalance requires institutional reforms that ensure proportional representation in national decision-making bodies, including the Federal Executive Council, National Assembly leadership, and security architecture. A rotational presidency or power-sharing framework—like a reinvigorated version of the federal character principle—could help reduce feelings of marginalization and signal a commitment to national unity and equity.

Furthermore, breaking the cycle of elite dominance and conspiracy demands the democratization of local and regional governance structures. Many South-Eastern elites have maintained their grip on power by monopolizing local institutions, manipulating electoral processes, and diverting public resources. Strengthening civil society, empowering youth and grassroots movements, and enforcing transparency through digital governance tools can reduce elite impunity. In particular, restoring autonomy to local governments and making them financially independent will disrupt elite capture and allow for more responsive, accountable leadership that reflects the needs of the people rather than elite interests.

Lastly, addressing elite conspiracy requires economic justice and regional development to eliminate the material foundations of discontent. Persistent underdevelopment and infrastructure neglect in the South-East have been weaponized by both state and regional elites to manipulate public sentiment. A strategic development plan focused on roads, education, industrial zones, and energy access would not only create jobs but also reduce the population’s susceptibility to elite-fueled grievances and separatist rhetoric. Ultimately, dismantling elite conspiracy in the

South-East involves creating inclusive institutions, fostering civic engagement, and ensuring that governance delivers visible and equitable benefits to all segments of the Nigerian society

CONCLUSION

The interplay between elite conspiracy and regional discontent in South-Eastern Nigeria underscores the complex dynamics of power, exclusion, and identity in the Nigerian state. Political elites, often driven by self-preservation and the quest for dominance, have historically manipulated ethno-regional sentiments to consolidate influence, while sidelining genuine developmental aspirations of the people. This elite capture of state resources and decision-making processes has fueled perceptions of marginalization, deepened mistrust in national institutions, and widened the gap between the federal government and South-Eastern communities. Consequently, the discontent manifests in political agitation, secessionist movements, and social unrest, as marginalized groups continue to perceive systemic inequities in the federation.

Resolving these challenges requires a critical shift from elite-driven politics of exclusion toward inclusive governance that addresses structural imbalances in Nigeria's federal system. Sustainable peace and national cohesion will depend on policies that ensure equitable distribution of resources, meaningful political representation, and genuine dialogue between the federal government and South-Eastern stakeholders. Without addressing the underlying role of elite conspiracy in perpetuating discontent, grievances will persist, fueling cycles of agitation and resistance. Ultimately, fostering transparency, accountability, and participatory governance offers the most viable pathway toward mitigating regional discontent and strengthening the foundations of Nigerian unity.

REFERENCES

- Afigbo, A. E. (2005). *Background to Nigerian federalism: Federal features in the colonial state*. Publius: The Journal of Federalism, 15(4), 13–29.
- Akpomera, E., & Omoyibo, K. U. (2014). Legitimacy crisis and elite conspiracy in local government administration in Nigeria. *Social Science Diliman*, 10(2).
- Alike, E. (2022, September 5). Aba industrial hub and Nigeria's infrastructural deficit. *ThisDay*. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/09/05/aba-industrial-hub-and-nigerias-infrastructural-deficit>
- Amnesty International. (2016). *'Bullets were raining everywhere': Deadly repression of pro-Biafra activists in Nigeria*. Amnesty International.
- Amnesty International. (2016a, June 10). *Nigeria: Killing of unarmed pro-Biafra supporters by military must be urgently investigated*.
- Ashiekwene, E. (2021). Perception study on unknown gunmen phenomenon in the Southeast Nigeria: The new

face of terror. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation (IJRSI)*.

Associated Press. (2023, February 20). *Nigeria: Gunmen kill 8 police days before presidential vote*. <https://apnews.com/article/61e112c8a84992af3fadb7e9004bf73a> AP News

Bottomore, T. (1993). *Elites and society* (2nd Ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

Ezeibe, C. (2013). [Analysis of Igbo political exclusion]. (As cited in) Walker, I., & Smith, H. J. (Eds.). (2002). *Relative deprivation: Specification, development, and integration*. Cambridge University Press.

Ezeibe, C. (2020). Social media and the Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria. *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, 31(1), 26–44.

Ezeoha, A., & Ugwu, J. (2015). Informal cross-border trade and smuggling in Nigeria: Implications for regional integration. *Journal of African Political Economy & Development*, 1(2), 43–58.

Higley, J., & Burton, M. G. (2006). *Elite foundations of liberal democracy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.

Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.

Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.

Kolawole, S. (2016, October 30). The conspiracy to destroy Nigeria. *TheCable*.

Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Minorities Commission Report. (1958). Report to Alan Lennox-Boyd. (As summarized in ACCORD article on ethnic diversity and conflict in Nigeria).

Mosca, G. (1939). *The ruling class* (H. D. Kahn, Trans.). McGraw-Hill.

Mustapha, A. R. (2005). *Ethnic structure, inequality and governance of the public sector in Nigeria* (CRISE Working Paper No. 18). University of Oxford.

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). (2020). *Labour force statistics: Unemployment and underemployment report*. Abuja: NBS.

Nwangwu, C. (2022). Neo-Biafra separatist agitations, state repression and insecurity in South-East Nigeria. *Society*, 60(1), 40–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00782-0>

Nweje, A., Ezeife, C., et al., as cited in Osimen, Daudu & Chidozie (2025). Neo-Biafra separatist agitations... PMC/PMCID Article.

Ojukwu, C. C., & Onuoha, J. (2016). Cultural expressions

of Biafra revivalism in contemporary Nigeria. *African Journal of History and Culture*, 8(5), 49–60.

Okeke, V. O. (2019). Elite conspiracy, economic marginalization, and the resurgence of Biafra separatism in Nigeria. *African Studies Review*, 62(3), 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.42>

Osaghae, E. E., & Suberu, R. T. (2005). *A history of identities, violence, and stability in Nigeria* (CRISE Working Paper No. 6). University of Oxford.

Osimen, N. K., Daudu, O. C., & Chidozie, C. (2025). Political exclusion and the quest for self-determination in Southeastern Nigeria. *African Renaissance*, 22(1), 169–192.

Pareto, V. (1935). *The mind and society: A treatise on general sociology* (A. Livingston, Trans.). New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace.

Premium Times. (2025, January 30). *Appeal court affirms IPOB's proscription as terrorist group*. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-east/770712-breaking-appeal-court-affirms-ipobs-proscription-as-terrorist-group.html> Premium Times

Nigeria

Punch. (2018, January 19). *Court affirms IPOB's proscription, designation as terrorist group*. <https://punchng.com/court-affirms-ipobs-proscription-designation-as-terrorist-group/> Punch Newspapers

Putnam, R. D. (1976). *The comparative study of political elites*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Reuters. (2024, May 20). *Nigerian judge denies separatist leader Kanu bail for the second time*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerian-judge-denies-separatist-leader-kanu-bail-second-time-2024-05-20/> Reuters

Scott, J. (2008). Culture and inequality: A critique of Bourdieu's distinction. *Sociological Review*, 56(1), 38–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00755.x>

Sote, L. (2022, December 21). Elite conspiracy against Nigerians. *Punch Newspaper*.

Suberu, R. T. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. United States Institute of Peace Press.