

The role of ethnic Militias in Africa: wars and instability

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Abstract:

The article analyzes how ethnic militias shape complex pathways that enable internal, regional and even external actors to privatize conflicts and wars within the African state and Nigeria. It begins by providing a definition of ethnic militias and an overview of their prevalence in Africa, The difference between ethnic militias and pro-government ethnic militias. Then examines the various ways in which ethnic militias contribute to the privatization of conflicts and wars, and instability. Finally, it discusses the implications of this phenomenon for peace and security in Nigeria.

Key words: Ethnic Militias, Wars and Instability, Privatize Conflicts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of identity and ethnic clashes is one of the fundamental issues that tops the security agenda of African countries, with its deep implications for the national security of these countries, whether at the level of the sovereignty of the national territory and its unity, the infringement of the legitimacy of the political institutions of the state, and the results that follow from ethnic and identity crises and wars.

The ethno-identity factor plays a significant role in shaping the phenomenon of militias in Africa. It serves as a complex and multifaceted logic that contributes to the perpetuation of intra-state wars on the continent. This is primarily a result of the influence of both internal and external factors that have weakened the nature of state legitimacy and its functional capacity to monopolize the security sector and legitimate violence. Consequently, new actors have emerged that have become central to the conflict dynamics in Africa. These include ethnic militias, mercenaries, warlords, and private military companies. They all contribute negatively to the continuation of conflicts in new forms and patterns. This has made it easier for the parties involved to achieve the greatest possible profits at the expense of the central state authority.

Furthermore, the disruption of the effective construction of the modern nation-state in sub-Saharan Africa has also played a role in the rise of militias. All the activities carried out by these new actors represent a parallel logic to the state, operating with illegitimate mechanisms. They often work within criminal and mafia networks, which negatively contributes to the spread of war economies. This, in turn, hinders the state's economic activity and leads to the spread of threats resulting from the interaction of imbalances in economic and social structures. As a result, instability persists at all levels and sectors.

2. Ethnic Militias in Africa: An Analysis of the Nature of the Role

The rise of ethnic militias in Africa is a complex issue with multiple causes. Therefore, it is important to analyze the conceptual framework of ethnic militias in Africa, and the difference between ethnic militias and pro-government ethnic militias.

2.1 The conceptual framework of ethnic militias in Africa

The prevalence of militias in conflicts is influenced by case studies from Africa and the world, including pro-government and anti-government groups. However, these studies often lack clarity on the definition of "militia" creating a vague and unstable concept (Taylor, 2022, p135). The theoretical literature on militias highlights several issues (Taylor, 2022, p135):

-Firstly, the historical experience of militias is often overlooked, leading to a lack of critical engagement with their unique role in conflict. Contemporary militias are often treated differently, with only a few potential similarities assessed.

-Secondly, the typologies used do not adequately distinguish between militias and other types of actors, often overlapping with other non-state and quasi-state actors.

-Thirdly, the literature suggests that a change in the security environment is a significant factor in the establishment of militias, as they are primarily reactive actors.

-Finally, militias operate on two continua: organizational structure and relationship to the state, with closer ties resulting in higher internal organizational structure.

Militias are irregular armed forces operating in weak or failed states, often composed of lower-class young people seeking money, resources, power, and security (Reno, 2011, p05). Militias, often representing specific ethnicities or tribes, are skilled, unconventional fighters operating outside the official security sector and central government leadership. They exploit civilians and operate outside the

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law, filling the gap created by the lack of effective national and regional security institutions(Reno, 2011, p05).

Militias possess various weapons, train men, and establish camps to compensate for power and political participation gaps in regional and local systems(williams, p04). In addition, Ethnic identification, social and economic insecurity, and unequal development opportunities complicate ethnic project organizing, leading to potential violent conflict if project goals aren't easily achieved.

Gilbert defines ethnic militias as non-governmental warring parties fighting for ethnic nationalism and defending their interests. They are passionate about their nationality and willing to use weapons, distinguishing them from other armed groups like sects and religious fundamentalists. Ethnic extremism involves non-state combatants defending their group's interests(Gilbert, 2013, p01). Also, ethnic militias are youth-based organizations created to protect their ethnic groups' interests, often using violence. They are viewed as paramilitary elements in society, as the state fails to provide opportunities for citizens to reach their potential, leading to loyalty shifting from the ineffective state to alternative groups(Tersoo and Ejue, 2019, p209).

Ethnic groups are organized, violence-oriented groups with diverse elements and age groups. They are founded to promote and protect their interests. Ethnic militias are extreme forms where the ethnic group takes on the role of an armed group, aiming to influence power structures and highlight deteriorating material conditions, political deprivation, and marginalization of their group or social environment(Tersoo and Ejue, 2019, p209). Ethnic militias and rebellions are similar in their military actions, destruction of lives and property, and destabilization of the country. However, they differ in their retaliatory actions and affiliation. Rebels retaliate quickly, while ethnic militias delay their attacks due to organizational processes. Ethnic militias are tribal, while rebellions involve members from all

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walks of life(Tersoo and Ejue, 2019, p209). Different ethnic groups take on extremist positions and gradually transform into militia groups that rely on ethnic identity and claim to operate through a mechanism that achieves the desires of the people(Adebayo, p10). Agbu identifies the key features of ethnic militia dynamics including the use of violence as a mechanism for expressing their demands. As for Ekas and Egberi, ethnic militias act as a social pressure group designed to influence the power structure in favor of and draw attention to the deteriorating material conditions or perceived political deprivation and marginalization of their group(Adebayo, p10).

2. 2 The difference between ethnic militias and pro-government ethnic militias

Ethnic militias and pro-government ethnic militias have emerged as additional bilateral or third parties in many civil wars around the world. These actors have played different roles or functions, such as counter-insurgency forces, protecting ethnic minorities, and defending the interests of ethnic groups and/or ethnic political parties (Thomson, 2019, p560). The formation of ethnic militias, particularly pro-government militias, is influenced by ethnic mobilization in ethnic conflict. Ethnicity serves as a basis for recruitment into armed organizations, often marking in-groups and out-groups within the state. Ethnic politicization creates new political equations, and both rebels and militias use identity-based divisions or politicize ethnicity for recruitment, tactical, and political purposes. Understanding ethnic mobilization in armed groups is crucial for analyzing how ethnic militias emerge and their role in different contexts(Thomson, 2019, p563).

In contrast, Ethnic militias are civilian forces mobilized on an ethnic basis to support specific goals of ethnic groups in ethno-political conflicts. These non-state or non-state armed actors are primarily composed of a single ethnic group, defending their kin's security and interests against multiple competing factions in weak

state representation or internal division. Ethnic militias are recruited exclusively from within a single ethnic group, consisting of members from specific villages or regions, and compete for power and resources among other competing ethnic groups.

(Thomson, 2019, p564). However, ethnic militias often compared to warlords or local power brokers, provide civilian policing functions and alternative governance structures to protect their interests from competing criminal gangs. They are not necessarily pro- or anti-state but often have a contentious relationship with the state in pursuit of their goals, despite their minimal control over territory, people, and resources(Thomson, 2019, p564).

The impact of the strength of ties between the state and pro-government militias on the formation of civilian violence, Civilians are more likely to join militias and engage in violence when they are strongly connected to the state and have a shared interest in the military outcome. In addition, according to the principal-agent logic, pro-government militias that operate outside of state control often engage in actions to improve their position(Abbs, 2019, p02). This is especially the case when pro-government militias operate in a high-risk context where compliance with state orders carries significant risks for the principal, especially in the context of ethnic politics and the implications that may lead to violence (Abbs, 2019, p02).

Joint ethnic recruitment is one of the methods that the state often uses to strengthen ties with pro-government militias and reduce the commitment concerns that arise from the principal-agent problem(Abbs, 2019, p02). Ethnic-based recruitment can lead to two forms of ethnic militias: joint pro-government ethnic militias and breakaway pro-government militias. Joint pro-government ethnic militias are composed of the ethnic kin of the ruling elite, such as the Hutu Interahamwe in Rwanda. Breakaway pro-government militias, on the other hand, also fight on behalf of the state but are composed of anti-government individuals, often ethnic groups excluded from

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power, such as the Home Guard in Kenya, and/or former members of an ethnic rebel group(Abbs, 2019, p02).

An ethnic militia is considered pro-government when the militia is clearly loyal to the government and is not defined as part of the regular security forces. It is specifically recruited on an ethnic basis in order to support ethnic goals. Pro-government ethnic militias are composed of individuals from a single ethnic group or, in some cases, a coalition of ethnic groups(Abbs, 2019, p05). Shared ethnic identity is the basis for recruitment into the militia and thus for inclusion or exclusion within the pro-government militia. Pro-government militias may also include non-local groups recruited from co-ethnic nationals, for example, the Rwandan Liberation Army operates in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alongside their Congolese Hutu kin. In addition, pro-government ethnic militias are formed (or selected) to support ethnic goals, such as maintaining a favorable political or economic distribution or protecting a particular segment of the civilian population(Abbs, 2019, p05).

The incentives for attracting or recruiting pro-government ethnic militias vary depending on whether they are recruited from their own ethnic group or from groups formed from anti-government or breakaway populations. In contrast, these types of pro-government ethnic militias have different motivations for fighting on behalf of the government(Abbs, 2019, p06). These differences are likely to affect the strength of the militia's relationship between the state and the pro-government ethnicity, shaping the loyalty of the pro-government ethnic militia to the state and its commitment as a fighting force. Based on these different ethnic ties, two types of militias can be found: co-ethnic pro-government militias and breakaway pro-government militias. Breakaway pro-government militias are composed of local recruits from the predominantly anti-government population. Therefore, their use of violence in support of the state conflicts with the national aspirations of the ethnic group to which

they belong. Breakaway groups are typically composed of groups excluded from power and often also include former members of an ethnic insurgency (Abbs, 2019, p06).

The absence of ties between the state and breakaway pro-government ethnic militias and loyalties to their ethnic group is likely to hinder widespread recruitment into breakaway pro-government militias. States have different incentives for mobilizing or selecting co-ethnic groups (Abbs, 2019, p07). In contexts of ethnic and political exclusion, incumbents often try to maintain the privileged position of their ethnic group and ensure the survival of their regime by limiting military recruitment and patronage to their ethnic kin, thereby maintaining control over military institutions. Recruitment from ethnic kin is likely to provide a convenient way to organize armed recruitment as it is often more salient and stable than other recruitment categories. Given its prominence, recruitment on an ethnic basis reduces coordination costs and makes it easier to identify loyalists and potential recruits (Abbs, 2019, p07).

Some incumbents have tried to build co-ethnic armies and promote coexistence in key military positions. However, the process of ethnic stacking is relatively rare because it is difficult to implement and is often not a viable option during armed conflict. Attempts to build or reform ethnic armies often provoke coups and violent resistance from military officers of outgroups, as well as counter-coups (Abbs, 2019, p07).

In the Central African Republic, President Patassé's attempts to promote northern military personnel led to three ethnic mutinies by southern factions of the army. In most cases, incumbents inherit multi-ethnic armies and therefore cannot guarantee the loyalty of some factions within the security forces. For example, many Tutsi army leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's armed forces defected during armed mutinies (Abbs, 2019, p07).

3. Ethnic militias in Nigeria: An analysis of influence strategies

There are many various factors that contribute to the emergence of ethnic militias in the Niger Delta, including the nature of the Nigerian state, political failures, and economic inequalities. Also, Nigeria's history of military rule as a breeding ground for ethnic militias. The violent tactics employed by the state itself are seen as a contributing factor.

3. 1 Emergence history of ethnic militias in Nigeria

In Nigeria there are many ethnic militias, Oodua People's Congress, Arewa People's Congress, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, Egbesu Boys of Africa, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, Movement for the Restoration and Defense of the Niger Delta, Bakassi Boys, and the Ijaw Youths(Adebayo, p12).

The rise of various ethnic militia groups that have violently attacked other ethnic groups and government institutions in Nigeria can be attributed to feelings of marginalization in terms of resource allocation as well as control of power by members of those ethnic groups (Otite, p816). This expression has found very strong expression through the formation of many ethnic militias, such as OPC, MOSOP, Efik, Ibibio and others, that fought the Nigerian state, and some even turned separatists with the belief that the nation as it is currently constituted cannot provide a platform for effective empowerment of their interests. Some ethnic elites who feel unable to change other elites in terms of direct access to state resources mobilize uneducated and unemployed youth, who seek to unleash violence on members of other ethnic and religious groups with the misconception that members of other ethnic groups are the cause of their economic problems(Otite, p816)

In Nigeria, this development began under the guise of ethnic militia movements claiming to represent and seek to protect their

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different ethnic interests in a country where the state is largely unqualified to meet the demands of ethnic nationalities (Otite, p816).

Prominent among these militias are a large number of Niger Delta militias such as the Egbesu Boys of Africa, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force and the aforementioned Movement for the Restoration and Defense of the Niger Delta. Other, more prominent militias include the Oodua People's Congress, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, and the Arewa People's Congress. In fact, the move towards ethnic national self-determination has been the greatest challenge to the security of the Nigerian nation since the 1990s(Otite, p816). The specific emergence of the phenomenon of ethnic militias as a particular challenge to the Nigerian nation-state cannot be separated from the opening up of the political space for the practice of electoral rights and activities.

Over the years, the military has dominated leadership under the leadership of autocrats such as General Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985), General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), and General Sani Abacha (1993-1998). The gradual but steady militarization of Nigerian society continued until the 1999 elections which led to the assumption of power by President Olusegun Obasanjo as the country's elected president(Otite, p816). Therefore, the high rise of ethnic militias in Nigeria is what unites Nigerians against state excesses after years of autocratic rule. Nigerians share a lack of faith in their government, the rule of law, a feeling of oppression, and not getting their fair share of resources(Okumagba, p240). There are also a large number of ethnic groups fighting militias associated with the three main ethnic groups, the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, as well as groups associated with ethnic minorities. These armed groups are characterized by the use of indecisive violence, a majority youth membership, ethnic identity affiliations, and dynamics that are often of a popular nature(Okumagba, p242).

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It is not only the ethnic minority groups that have expressed feelings of marginalization and deprivation, but also some of the major ethnic groups have also been forced to make threats against marginalization. The emergence of the indigenous people of Biafra (Igbos) demanding an independent state of Biafra is a result of their feeling of marginalization in the power equation and resource allocation in the Nigerian state(Adebayo, p12). This situation has persisted since the civil war in 1970, when the Federal Government of Nigeria found it difficult to integrate the Igbos into the prevailing political equation in the country. The same negative feelings of dominance and marginalization are what provided the enabling environment for the crisis that resulted from the 1967 coups and counter-coups that led to the civil war(Adebayo, p12).

Some analysts have argued that the identity crisis was a major issue in the various crises that culminated in the civil war in 1967. Some ethnic groups, especially the Hausa-Fulani, have argued that the more educated eastern region since 1967 has been dominated by them. Ethnic origin was the primary determinant of who occupied positions of power(Adebayo, p13). The Niger Delta region has consistently complained of its marginalization in the power configuration of the country, despite being the region that produces over 80% of the country's wealth, which is used to develop other parts of the country. Their moves to monitor resources and ensure in resource allocation and proper government attention to environmental degradation issues in the region led to the emergence of armed groups that violently pushed their operations between 2006 and 2009. They were granted amnesty by the federal government led by Musa Yar'Adua(Adebayo, p14).

Although Goodluck Jonathan served as president for six years from 2009 to 2015, the southern region believes that the issues of neglect, environmental degradation, and denial of access to resources have not been properly addressed, leading to attacks on oil facilities in the region by the Niger Delta Avengers groups(Adebayo, p12). The

killings or uprisings carried out by ethnic militias in the Niger Delta were a result of the complete failure of the federal and state governments to achieve the political, social, and economic well-being that should give these oil-producing states a decent livelihood and compensate for the environmental hazards. Marginalization in the system is not limited to resource allocation and power sharing, but there is also a major challenge in the way government agencies respond to the needs of different segments of society. The challenges of unequal treatment of members of different ethnic groups within the Nigerian state have raised calls for a restructuring of the federation(Adebayo, p12).

3. 2 The strategic impact of ethnic militias on the path of national security in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the problem of rising sectarian strife and periodic massacres of people on the basis of ethnic affiliation can be easily understood by the elite, while the elite manipulate ordinary people to attack their neighbors who resort to violence to achieve selfish and political goals(Okumagba, p243). Attacks and massacres of members of other ethnic groups in one part of the country often lead to increased ethnic awareness in other parts, but this situation is irrational. This is an indication that individuals have independent sources of weapons from the government, as the ability to use violence without organization leads to social insecurity and ethnic awareness. The federal government has never taken any serious measures to ban or confiscate these weapons(Okumagba, p243).

The emergence and growth of militia groups in Nigeria is due to the internal contradiction associated with the nature of the Nigerian state, which sought to maintain its control and dominance over society through violent approaches, which produced ethnic militias in the 1990s when the Nigerian state was under military dictatorship, especially during the Babangida and Abacha regimes (Tersoo, 2015, p209). The government's response to the Niger Delta crisis and the

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emergence of militias was to militarize the region to maintain stability and ensure the free flow of oil. This led to the emergence of many young activists, while non-violent groups resorted to violence as a challenge to the brutality caused by the presence of military personnel in the region. The aim of these armed groups was to challenge the state's violent stance and to emphasize the marginalization and deprivation that characterize the region. This situation led to the emergence and growth of militia groups in the Niger Delta region.

Between 1990 and 1999, no fewer than 24 minority ethnic groups emerged in the region(Tersoo, 2015, p209). These include the Egbesu, the Ijaw National Congress of Chikoko, the Ijaw Youth Council, the Ijaw Peace Movement, the Isoko National Youth Movement, and the Ogoni people. Among other initiatives that emerged after 1999 are the Niger Delta Liberation Movement and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force. None of these groups had a violent tendency at the start, but the prevailing circumstances forced them to turn to criminal activities. The factors that include the nature of the Nigerian state and its nature, failure, lack of political leadership, political institutions, power struggle, and economic relations between ethnic nationalities, are some of the factors that served as a starting point for the emergence of ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta region in particular(Tersoo, 2015, p210). This can be explained in three points regarding the activities of ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta(Tersoo, 2015, p210):

-First: Frustration leads to many forms of aggression, and this may not happen in all cases because the level of tolerance varies from group to group. Given the relative strength of the Nigerian state in the case of the Niger Delta, confrontation with the government often leads to increased frustration, and as a result, militia activities are directed at the government and other groups.

-Second: Aggression is a result of frustration, as armed groups in the region express social and economic hardship and inequality in the distribution of the country's oil wealth due to marginalization and deprivation. This explains the crime-related activities that include kidnapping for ransom, sabotage of oil pipelines, illegal oil storage, attacks on military personnel, and in other evidence that proves the criminal basis of the activities carried out by ethnic militia groups.

-Third: Can these activities carried out by ethnic militias be classified as a crime? It is considered a crime. At the beginning of the formation of militia groups, their goal was to combat deprivation, injustice, and marginalization in the Niger Delta.

However, this has turned into criminal activities such as bunkering, sabotage of oil pipelines, kidnapping, and hostage-taking.

Several ethno-religious crises occurred in Nigeria between 1980 and 2016, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives and the destruction of billions of dollars worth of property. The main cause of these crises is the deep-rooted identity crisis in which citizens do not see themselves as Nigerian citizens but see themselves as belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic identities. In this way, Nigerian citizens know their willingness to die for the national interest, while some of them will be willing to kill or die for their ethnic or religious interests(Adebayo, p15).

The management of internal security in Nigeria has been fraught with many challenges, with many security agencies unable to contain security threats in the country. Over the past decade, Nigeria has moved from one security challenge to another, with the army being mobilized in internal security operations in the form of joint task forces unable to provide security.

As a result, the security agencies lack the capacity to address the many security challenges facing the nation. The centralized security system in place in Nigeria has provided an institutional mechanism

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that has made the security agencies unable to respond quickly and proactively to security threats across the country(Adebayo, p15). These activities exacerbate the identity crisis in the country, as some feel they are being treated unfairly because they do not belong to the ethnic group of choice at a particular time. The activities and actions of ethnic militia movements pose a major threat to national security through the many crimes, acts of terrorism, violence, assassination, kidnapping and murder that result in serious social, economic, political and humanitarian consequences(Shittu, 2013, p24).

Economically, the series of crises and counter-attacks by the government are enough to deter investors, especially foreign investors, and even local investors or existing investors who want to move to areas where they feel their investments are safe or when there is relative peace.

The long-term local impact of this situation is on unemployment, and so young people become ready tools for use by militia groups. Militia activities have reduced oil earnings as there has been a sharp decline in crude oil production, leading to lower incomes, affecting people's living standards by increasing unemployment, which in turn can lead to an increase in crime in the country(Shittu, 2013, p24).

Ethnic militias and secessionist movements not only challenge the authority of the Nigerian state as the only body with legal or legitimate control over the instrument of coercion, but also detract from the loyalty and obedience it should reap from its citizens(Shittu, 2013, p24). Thus, Nigerian citizens are torn between loyalty to the Nigerian state and loyalty to movements within the group that today appear as ethnic militias. Citizens were forced to choose between the two, and loyalty to ethnic groups replaced loyalty to the Nigerian state. For many Nigerians, Nigeria remains committed to what each group feels it can still get out of the accumulation process, rather than

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through any legal or psychological definition with its aspirations and goals as a nation(Shittu, 2013, p24). Ethnic militias primarily use speedboats and guerrilla warfare tactics when attacking oil facilities. Their main strategy has been to disrupt oil production and force the government to negotiate their demands. This has been achieved by issuing threats and warnings to oil companies, attacking individuals, oil company facilities, disrupting or even halting oil production, and kidnapping or taking oil workers hostage with counter-operations and attacks(Ibaba, 2010, p230).

Militias like the Niger Delta Liberation Movement are radical revolutionaries seeking to achieve political goals as well as develop the region. However, some militia groups and their opportunistic tendencies have been criminalized, as evidenced by their involvement in oil theft, kidnapping, hostage-taking, extortion of individuals and ships, governments and oil companies.

For these elements, violence has simply been privatized in the context of lucrative opportunities. Initially, the opportunistic militia elements were guards, escorts and agents for oil theft cartels. However, such militias soon entered into their own interests in terms of controlling land to supply ships with fuel, or refining crude oil or producing it for petroleum products(Ibaba, 2010, p230).

In terms of oil theft, ethnic militias do not act alone but in collusion with senior military, security, government and company officials, oil contractors, traders and even unions. The involvement of these corrupt officials from oil companies, military and security units is a major outcry that it is a joint effort between all those involved in the conflicts and how these networks are jeopardizing national security(Ibaba, 2010, p230). At the heart of this complex network are those who benefit from the conflicts and therefore have an interest in perpetuating them in order to make more profits. However, it should be noted that the links of militias to oil theft are sometimes not simply for profit but to support and finance militia operations. The criminality

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of the militias has been manifested in their involvement in piracy, kidnapping and extortion, which are often engaged in by small armed gangs, sects, private militias and militias working on their own account in the field of crime, which are less under the control of the main groups and rebel ethnic militias(Ibaba, 2010, p230)

3. CONCLUSION

Ethnic militias play a crucial role in creating complex dynamics that directly affect the effectiveness of state security and economic development in Africa and Nigeria. This is the result of the interaction of various actors discussed in the article, particularly those related to the variable of ethnicity and identity. These factors have formed a fundamental basis for explaining ethnic conflicts and the various struggles related to security, military, and economic development.

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