
INSURGENCY: NATURE, CHARACTER AND MANIFESTATION**Dr. Augustine Omosa Obazee****Department of International Relations and Strategic Studies,****College of Arts and Social Sciences****Igbinedion University, Okada.****Edo State, Nigeria.****Email: austinemission@yahoo.com****+2347087323493****&****Ehioze Egharevba****Department of History and International Studies****University of Benin****Benin City, Edo State****Nigeria****Ehiozeegharevba@yahoo.com****Abstract**

This study investigates insurgency, which is one of the oldest forms of conflict. It espouses the history of insurgency which is encapsulated in the various revolutions that took place in the old civilizations of the Greek city-states and the Roman Empire as well as those of the 1776 American War of Independence from British colonial rule and the French Revolution of 1789. The study also showcased the nature and character of insurgency presenting it as internal conflicts waged by indigenous movements for political, economic, or social control of a particular State or region. It further showcased the manifestation of insurgency in various forms such as civil war, revolution, resistant movement and islamist extremism. The study concludes by stating that insurgency manifest itself in various forms and has led to loss of lives and properties and it remains a threat to national peace and tranquility. Hence to combat this menace the entire globe, the government, state actors, non-state actors, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and others would have to take into action necessary measures or steps in combatting it.

Keywords: *Revolution, conflict, violence and war*

Introduction

Insurgency is one of the oldest forms of conflict. Sydney Tarrow (2007, 587). Records of ancient regimes show how their rulers were frequently faced with revolts and insurrections. Even in the modern era, states continue to be faced with varying categories of insurgent movements. For instance, the United States Army is recorded to have spent decades conducting what was, essentially, a counterinsurgency in the southern states during the period after the Civil War; the British Army was faced with multiple insurgencies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and as the colonial era came to an end in the post-World War II period, the Western militaries especially their armies continued to face this same challenge of insurgency. Sydney Tarrow (2007, 587-600).

Presently, the problem of combating insurgencies is barely different as the armed forces of several nations across the globe have continued to face the same situation. Perhaps, one of the reasons why insurgency has continued to plague nations and states across the globe is that every insurgency has its distinctive nature, develops its character and manifests in different ways.

It is against this backdrop, therefore, that this study attempts to detail the nature, character and manifestations of insurgency across the globe. Meanwhile, as a departure point, it is deemed necessary to conceptualize insurgency.

The Concept of Insurgency

There is presently no consensus among scholars, analysts and military strategists as regards what constitutes insurgency. This is because different scholars proffer different explanations for the concept of insurgency. Notwithstanding, insurgency is taken in this paper to refer to the activities of a group or groups seeking political power, through violence or other means which are usually considered illegal by the existing government. Whereas the foregoing definition associates insurgency with a group or groups seeking political power, it is instructive to note that not all insurgencies necessarily seek to replace an existing government, instead, an insurgent group may seek to only share power or cause a breakdown of law and order to erode the authority of the central government. A simpler definition of insurgency places it as a tactical form of warfare, using violent means to resist the state. In the same vein, Hamilton defines insurance as a revolt against an established government not reaching the proportions of a full-scale revolution D.W. Hamilton (1998).

Roger Scruton, in his contribution to the subject of insurgency, defines the concept as a term used in international law, which falls short of revolution, rebellion or civil war, to describe an uprising against a constituted government D.W. Hamilton (1998). However, David Galula in *Counter Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, points out that an insurgency 'is any protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order as seen in China (1927-1949), Greece (1945-1950), Indochina (1945-1954), Malaya (1948-1960) and Algeria (1954:1962). D. Galula (2006, 2). At this point, it becomes necessary to provide a brief historical overview of the concept of insurgency.

History of Insurgency

As noted earlier, insurgencies are not new in the history of states. They date back to antiquity, as far back as the old civilizations of the Greek city-states and the Roman Empire when the rulers of these ancient civilizations often had to face the challenge of insurgencies, insurrections and revolts. James Fearon and David Laitin (2003, 75-90). The main aim of insurgencies has always been the overthrow of the established order and its replacement by a new social and political order. Insurgencies seek power through violence. Ultimately, both the Greek and Roman Empires fell as a result of these internal rebellions and insurgencies.

Examples of insurgencies and terrorism dates back to four centuries ago, spanning many continents and states. These include the 1776 American War of Independence from British colonial rule and the French Revolution of 1789. In the Balkans, the old Hapsburg Empire was overthrown by a series of insurgencies, including the murder of Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist at Sarajevo, leading to the First World War, alongside the disintegration of the Hapsburg Empire. Timothy Snyder (2025).

From the foregoing notwithstanding, one may begin to wonder if the nature and character of insurgency have changed over time.

On this note, Metz and Miller argue that whereas insurgency has existed as long as the powerful have frustrated the weak to the point of violence, the history of insurgency is divided into different eras. They therefore argue that the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States of America marked the beginning of another era of insurgency. S. Metz and Raymond Millen (2004). This is especially true as the period reduced the gap which existed between insurgency and terrorism, considering the spate at which insurgent groups continue to adopt terrorist tactics in their prosecution of the counter-insurgency war.

Nature and Character of Insurgency

Identifying the nature and character of insurgency is indeed an unenviable task. This is because insurgencies across the globe defy simple characterization since they employ a wide range of violent, political, social, and economic means in the pursuit of their goals. Moreover, each insurgency is motivated by unique conditions, possessing distinctive dynamics that make simple solutions based on doctrinal formulas difficult if not impossible. Despite these challenges, however, it is necessary to note that certain shared traits provide an insightful basis for understanding the nature and character of insurgency across the globe.

Notable among such shared traits include the fact that virtually all insurgencies are internal conflicts waged by indigenous movements for political, economic, or social control of a particular State or region. R.S Moore (2025). The foregoing does not however preclude the fact that insurgent movements may receive external support from foreign governments as well as nonstate supranational organizations. When these occur, such support is usually in the form of technical, ideological and financial assistance, whereas it is the bulk of the indigenous people that prosecute the conflict. The point to stress is that an insurgent movement is usually indigenous to the given State whose authority it seeks to resist using violence. Sufficient examples revealing insurgencies as internal conflicts are found in cases such as the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, Iraqi and Taliban insurgencies in the Middle East, and insurgency in Libya as seen in the course of the Libyan uprising, among countless others.

In addition, since the State enjoys a monopoly of legitimate access to military, political and economic resources needed to prosecute any war, most insurgencies adopt asymmetric methods to achieve their goals. R.S Moore (2025). According to Colonel Robert Shaw, the first commanding officer of the U.S. Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group, asymmetric warfare refers to the kind of warfare where the "belligerents are mismatched in their military capabilities or accustomed methods of engagement such that the militarily disadvantaged power must press its special advantages' on the weaknesses of the militarily advantaged power. Roy Cox (2012). Against this backdrop, David Galula insists that insurgencies are usually obliged to remain fluid, "consistently waging profitable hit-and-run operations" against the government's soft targets; deciding when and when not to engage government forces in direct battle. David Galula (2006,10). He further insists that insurgency movements survive by not being seen and by fighting in subversive and shadowy groups that only show themselves momentarily, and then blend back into the surrounding physical or human terrain. David Galula (2006,10).

Drawing from the foregoing, Moore in his attempt to examine the character of insurgency suggests that at the most basic level, regardless of particular circumstances, geographical locations and causal factors, insurgencies reflect a complex, three-dimensional web, including actions, structures and beliefs. This 'three-dimensional web' is therefore considered germane in understanding the character of insurgencies. R.S Moore (2025).

Actions have to do with the daily, largely tactical, aspects of insurgencies. They include visible acts, events and behaviours that identify and distinguish insurgency from other forms of conflict. The most widely stressed is the way and manner through which insurgency movements use violent methods in pursuing their goals. This may include acts of intimidation, terrorist attacks, and full-scale attacks. Other activities of insurgent groups that distinguish insurgency from other forms of conflict include subversion, political infiltration, and economic sabotage. In addition, actions may also refer to counterinsurgency activities of government which incites further violence on the part of the insurgents.

In the same vein, structures refer to the conditions that frame an insurgency. Such conditions may include marginalization, neglect, underdevelopment, unemployment, insecurity, political instability, and spirituality, among others. Insurgent groups therefore identify these structural issues and attempt to replace them with alternatives. These structural issues are societal problems which are identified as gaps. A.E Wendt (1987, 335). In the Iraqi insurgency for instance, the key structural alternatives which the insurgents seek to replace the existing order centres on developing indigenous and effective security capability, framing and adopting a viable constitution, as well as an end to foreign occupation. R.S Moore (2025). On the other hand, Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria seek to institute an Islamic caliphate over some parts of the country as an alternative socio-political structure. The third aspect has to do with belief systems which entails the attitudes, perceptions, prejudices, ideologies, worldviews, cultures, and social identities that fuel insurgencies.

Furthermore, Metz and Miller stress that insurgencies can be identified based on four main characteristics which they all share. These include effective strategy, effective ideology, effective leadership, and a method of obtaining resources. S. Metz and Raymond Millen (2004). "Both scholars argue that most successful insurgencies have been seen to possess these four attributes mentioned above. On the same note, attempting to further an understanding of insurgency based on its strategies, O'Neill identifies six distinctive attributes and strategies. These include conspiratorial, military-focused, urban-warfare strategy, protracted war, identity-focused, and composite approaches. Bard O'Neill (2005, 88).

The conspiratorial insurgency involves a situation where insurgent leaders aim to seize power by either instigating a revolution or seizing the opportunity of a revolutionary situation. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1907 is often cited as a good example of conspiratorial insurgency. On the other hand, military-focused insurgencies tend to build strong armies with which they intend to overthrow the existing order. In military-focused insurgencies, insurgent groups may choose to engage government forces in conventional warfare, having amassed the military capability to challenge the government.

This kind of insurgency is evident in civil wars and cases of armed resistance where the insurgent groups engage government forces in direct or indirect military confrontation. The third classification of insurgencies by O'Neill is urban warfare as a strategy of insurgency. Urban warfare refers to combat conducted in urban areas such as towns and cities amid civilians. Bard O'Neill (2005, 88). This Strategy is usually adopted by insurgent groups to ensure that government forces overreact against the population. While government forces try to reduce the number of civilian casualties, the insurgents rather use the civilians as human shields. This method was largely adopted in the course of the Iraqi insurgency.

In addition, O'Neill identifies protracted warfare as one of the attributes of insurgency. The idea of protracted warfare was first conceptualized by Mao Tse-tung when he called for the Chinese to launch small assaults on Japanese supply lines rather than launch confrontations against the then-superior Japanese military. This strategy was divided by Mao Tse-tung into three phases which include: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic counter-offensive. This kind of insurgency also incorporates economic sabotage and terrorism in its range of operations. Furthermore, O'Neill identifies that some insurgent groups may be identity-focused. This group of insurgents attach themselves to a particular ethnic, religious or ideological affiliation to gain sympathy from members of the group. The sixth classification for insurgencies based on O'Neill's views is the composite approach in which insurgent groups adopt several strategies to fit into specific circumstances. O'Neill argues that this approach is most commonly adopted by contemporary insurgent groups which are dynamic and do not specifically fit into any single category. Bard O'Neill (2005, 88).

Manifestations of Insurgency

What is meant by the manifestations of insurgency are the visible outputs of insurgency movements. Put differently, a manifestation of insurgency refers to the events and actions that are reflective of insurgency. Understanding the manifestations of insurgency must however begin with a reminder of the meaning of insurgency which is taken in this paper to refer to efforts by an organized and motivated group (or groups) using protracted, irregular warfare and allied political techniques to obtain political goals. J.D Kiras (2007, 224-231). In line with this definition, therefore, some of the following subtitles would be discussed as manifestations of insurgency. These include but are not limited to civil wars, revolutions, resistance movements, and Islamist extremism.

Civil War

There are two approaches to understanding of what a civil war truly entails. The first approach regards a civil war as a situation where the warring parties are essentially from the same country, fighting to control the government, establish a separatist state, or force a change in government policy. In the same vein, the second approach simply considers a civil war as any war between two or more parties where at least 1000 persons have been killed with not less than 100 being killed from both sides of the conflict. Edward Wong (2006). While none of the foregoing definitions is immune to criticisms and shortcomings, providing a thorough conceptual analysis of civil war is not the immediate concern of this paper. Rather, what is of relevance is to identify the extent to which a civil war can be considered as an insurgency.

In a study conducted by Fearon and Laitin, the researchers argue that civil wars could be understood as insurgencies since they share similar causal factors and characteristics. James Fearon and David Laitin (2003, 75-90). In the study, the researchers compiled the lists of civil wars alongside lists of other armed conflicts conventionally described as insurgencies for the same period. The aim was to ascertain the differences between civil wars and insurgencies. They however observed from their study that the same conflicts that qualified for description as civil wars also qualified for description as insurgencies. James Fearon and David Laitin (2003, 75-90). An earlier study by Desai and Eckstein (2003, 75-90) had similarly focused on the scope of conflicts regarded as civil wars, considering them as largely identical to the conflicts considered as insurgencies. It is therefore against the foregoing background that it becomes rational to discuss such civil wars as the English Civil War, the American Civil War and the Nigerian Civil War in the context of insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Revolutions

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2025) defines revolution as a complete change in ways of thinking and methods of working; as a time when people change a ruler or political system by using force or violence. Despite dictionary definition, however, there has over the years been a variety of ways through which scholars and philosophers have attempted to provide definitions for the concept of revolutions.

To Hegel for instance, a revolution is an irresistible change; a manifestation of the world-spirit in an unceasing quest for fulfilment. Marx takes the definition a step further, claiming that revolution is a product of irresistible historical forces which culminate in a struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Raymond Tanter and Manus Midlarsky (1967, 264-280). Nonetheless, the definition of revolution as offered by Hannah Arendt is considered specifically relevant for understanding the concept of revolution as a manifestation of insurgency.

According to Arendt, the revolutionary experience is a kind of restoration, whereby the insurgents attempt to restore liberties and privileges which were lost as a result of the government's temporary lapse into despotism. Hannah Arendt (1963). Indeed, aspects of the French Revolution as well as the American Revolution may be amenable to Arendt's interpretation. The insurgents might view the colonial authorities as strangers who have usurped the freedom which once belonged to the people. It is however needful to note at this point that not all revolutions qualify as insurgency. Thus, for a revolution to qualify as an insurgency, it should be violent possessing some of the characteristics of insurgency as earlier discussed. The revolution would also need to adopt one or more of the strategies that are characteristic of insurgent movements. Some notable revolutions in history can be categorized as insurgencies, including the French and Russian Revolutions of the 18th and 20th Centuries respectively.

Resistance Movements

According to the US Department of Defense's Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, a resistance movement is “an organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability. Lee (2017, 44)

There is a scholarly debate as to whether resistance movements can be rightly described as insurgencies. For instance, Major McCallister argues that there is a difference between insurgency and resistance movements, since in his opinion, insurgency ° is methodical while resistance may not be. W.S McCalister (2025). Lohman and Colin however refute the foregoing claim, arguing that resistance movements reflect the relationship between power and conflict and as such can be rightly regarded as insurgency. Andre Lohman and Flint Cohlin (2010, 1154-1166). Nonetheless, since this paper does not seek to meddle in the controversy associated with the question of whether resistance movements rightly qualify as insurgencies or not, it is however pertinent to note that as regards the arguments of McAllister, there is evidence of organized and methodical resistance movements. Therefore, if being methodical is McAllister's criterion for identifying insurgency, such resistance movements may as well qualify. It is against this backdrop that such organized and methodical resistance movements as Hezbollah, Viet Minh, Taliban and Free Syrian Army, among others, may be worthy of mention.

Islamist Extremism

In itself, Islamism is not a manifestation of insurgency. Rather, it is simply a set of ideologies which stress that Islam should guide all aspects of human society including theology, philosophy, ethics, law, spirituality, politics and personal life. Sheri Beerman (2003, 257-272). However, the relationship between Islamism and insurgency is found in the fact that Islamists do not merely seek to institute stricter religious observance or a change in political leadership but seek to ensure a revolutionary transformation of their societies. Sheri Beerman (2003, 257-272). Thus, to 'ensure revolutionary transformation of societies, Islamist groups have in different instances taken up arms against the government in a manner somewhat identical to the other forms of insurgency discussed above. Sufficient examples of Islamist groups that have over the years metamorphosed into insurgency groups include al Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon and the Wilayat 'Gharb Ifriqiyyah (Boko Haram) in Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, insurgency is considered to be an effort by an organized and motivated group (or groups) using protracted, irregular warfare and allied political techniques to obtain political goals. This paper has sought to establish that whereas every insurgency is unique, certain shared attributes distinguish insurgencies from other forms of conflicts and armed confrontation. The paper discusses the different attributes of insurgency as discussed by different scholars. It discusses the different forms through which insurgency has manifested itself across the years. Such areas include civil wars, revolutions, resistance movements and Islamist extremism. While insurgency continues to plague the entire globe in contemporary society, government policymakers, international organizations, non-governmental agencies as well as military strategists have continued to seek approaches through which insurgency can be adequately curtailed with minimal loss of lives and properties.

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