WHEN THE STATE FAILS: TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND GRASSROOTS QUEST FOR PEACE IN SOUTHERN KADUNA, KADUNA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examined the functionality of Nigeria's justice system in addressing the dynamics of ethno-religious violence through the lens of the prevailing circumstances in the Southern axis of Kaduna State. Southern Kaduna represents a critical case in which the justice system has neither delivered accountability nor provided structural guarantees against future violence. The study argued that the limitatioms of the judicial architecture in Nigeria has created a justice vacuum that undermined peacebuilding efforts and reinforced the cycle of impunity in the study area. The study revealed that this persistent failure of the justice system has eroded public trust and deepened intergroup divisions. Against this backdrop, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have provided alternative avenue to justice by promoting indigenous and restorative mechanisms that aligned with the socio-cultural realities of affected communities. The study critiqued the structural limitations of the formal justice system and emphasised the imperative of pluralistic justice architecture that incorporates transitional justice principles through the interventions of non-state actors. It is contended that while CSOs cannot underestimate the essence of state institutions, their strategic involvement in the judicial process is essential particularly in contexts where the application of formal judicial facilities seem to be absent, delegitimized, or complicit. The study, therefore, concluded that sustainable peace in Southern Kaduna requires a rethinking of justice that prioritizes accountability, recognition of victimhood, and inclusive, community-led approaches, which invariably constitute the fulctrum of CSOs over the procedural formalism of the failing justice system.
Keywords: Transitional Justice (TJ), Southern Kaduna, Peacebuilding, Nigeria

Introduction

The persistence of ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna marked by cycles of mass killings, targeted attacks, and impunity continues to provoke critical academic and policy attention (Ibrahim, 1989; Yusuf, 2007). Despite decades of bloodshed and destruction, the Formal Justice System (FJS) in Kaduna State has failed to provide effective redress, protection, or deterrence, particularly in conflicts between majority and minority ethno-religious communities such as the Hausa, Fulani, and Pagan Habe Maguzawa (Wuye, 2008). This failure is not merely administrative; it is structural and political. The FJS has repeatedly demonstrated an inability or unwillingness to prosecute perpetrators, address systemic bias, or construct inclusive narratives of justice. As a result, affected communities are left disillusioned, while cycles of violence recur unchecked (Ogbe, 2020).

This institutional void has foregrounded the critical role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in shaping responses to violence and advocating for justice. In the absence of decisive state leadership in post-conflict accountability, CSOs have increasingly assumed the role of unofficial mediators and transitional justice (TJ) actors (Uzuegbunam, 2013). In Southern Kaduna, this development marks a significant shift in the character and function of CSOs from service delivery and advocacy to more complex interventions in peacebuilding and restorative justice (Ikelegbe, 2013; Adejumobi, 2001). These organisations have begun to influence how ethno-religious violence is narrated, remembered, and addressed, challenging the silence and inertia of the FJS. Yet, the rise of CSOs in the TJ landscape is not without complexity. Their interventions are often contested, particularly in a politically polarized environment where competing narratives of victimhood and blame can exacerbate tensions (Okpanachu, 2009). Without a coordinated and legitimate justice mechanism, ethno-religious groups may construct divergent historical accounts that hinder rather than facilitate peacebuilding. This makes narrative control a central battleground in the struggle over justice and reconciliation. The interpretive power of CSOs, therefore, becomes a crucial element in transitional justice debates not just in what they do, but in how they frame past violence and shape future possibilities (Ifejika, & Ojo, 2024).

This study is situated within the growing discourse on the role of CSOs in post-conflict settings, with a specific focus on Southern Kaduna. It argues that CSOs have emerged as central actors in filling the justice vacuum left by the failing FJS, using indigenous frameworks, memory work, and community mobilization to reimagine justice in the aftermath of ethno-religious violence. The central question guiding this study is: how do the narratives advanced by CSOs in Southern Kaduna influence the broader goals of transitional justice, particularly those aimed at addressing the past to secure a peaceful future? By interrogating the discursive and functional role of CSOs, the study contributes to a rethinking of justice that is locally grounded, politically relevant, and normatively transformative.

Conceptualising Transitional Justice (TJ) in the Context of Southern Kaduna

Transitional Justice (TJ) is a framework that emerged from the global effort to address mass atrocities and systemic injustices in societies recovering from authoritarianism, civil war, and genocidal violence. Traditionally understood as a mechanism used during political transitions from dictatorship to democracy, or from conflict to peace, its application has expanded to encompass a broader array of social breakdowns, including entrenched ethno-religious violence and weak legal-institutional responses. In this sense, TJ is not simply a legal or procedural mechanism; it is a political and moral imperative to confront historical injustice and repair social fractures. In Kaduna State particularly Southern Kaduna, where ethno-religious violence has become cyclical and systemic, the relevance of TJ cannot be overstated.

The failure of the Formal Justice System (FJS) to provide justice, security, and accountability for victims has led to increasing demands for alternative forms of redress rooted in community-based and civil society-led initiatives. The logic of TJ arises when traditional or state-based judicial mechanisms are overwhelmed, incapacitated, or complicit. This is precisely

the case in Southern Kaduna, where the FJS has been unable or unwilling to prosecute perpetrators of violence, protect vulnerable populations, or prevent the recurrence of mass killings. These failures are not incidental; they reflect deeper structural and political weaknesses, including ethnic bias, elite capture of legal processes, and the securitization of ethno-religious conflict (Gana, 2023). When state institutions lose legitimacy, justice-seeking communities often turn to informal, indigenous, or non-state mechanisms. Thus, TJ frameworks become necessary not as a complement to the state system, but as a corrective to its glaring absence or inadequacy. What distinguishes TJ from conventional legal justice is its multi-dimensionality. As scholars like Allen and Macdonald (2013) and Madlingozi (2015) argue, TJ seeks not only to address individual criminal liability but also to interrogate the structural injustices and historical grievances that give rise to violence. In the Southern Kaduna context, this includes addressing issues such as land dispossession, religious discrimination, political marginalisation, and historical exclusion of minority ethnic groups.

Therefore, the TJ "toolkit" is broader than that of the FJS, it includes truth-telling, reparations, memorialization, institutional reform, guarantees of non-recurrence, and community reconciliation. These tools are not only restorative in nature but also transformative in intention. Integral to the operationalisation of these tools are Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). CSOs are frequently cited in the literature (Hayner, 1994; Crocker, 2000; Andrieu, 2010) as pivotal actors in transitional justice. Their contributions span from documentation and advocacy to mediation, capacity building, and facilitation of dialogue. In Nigeria, however, the literature on CSOs remains underdeveloped with regard to their role in transitional justice. While much attention has been paid to their role in promoting good governance, electoral integrity, and human rights (Obadare, 2004; 2007), relatively little has been written about their specific interventions in post-violence justice and reconciliation efforts.

In Kaduna State, this relationship is further complicated by the politicization of ethno-religious identities and the securitization of civil space. The relevance of CSOs in transitional justice becomes even more pronounced in the face of the FJS's repeated failures. Human Rights Watch (2003) and Melis and Esquivel-Korsiak (2016) have documented how the FJS in Nigeria, and particularly in states like Kaduna, often exhibits structural bias, inefficiency, and inaccessibility. These failures have alienated communities and intensified grievances, especially among those who perceive the justice system as favouring dominant ethnic or religious groups. In this vacuum, CSOs are not only stepping in to provide stopgap solutions; they are also reshaping the very meaning of justice by representing the interests of indigenous traditions, and restorative practices. Yet, their work is not immune to critique. Some scholars (Ikelegbe, 2013; Obadare, 2007) challenge the legitimacy and representativeness of CSOs, especially in rural or marginalised areas, warning against romanticising their role. Others highlight the limitations of externally funded NGOs that may be more accountable to donors than to the communities they claim to serve.

Despite these tensions, CSOs in Southern Kaduna have increasingly become central to the transitional justice landscape. Their interventions whether in conflict prevention, victim

support, or memory initiatives speak to a broader reimagining of what justice means in post-conflict societies. Crucially, they are shaping the narratives that underpin TJ: who counts as a victim, what events are remembered, what histories are acknowledged, and what futures are imagined. These narratives are not merely symbolic; they influence political claims, inter-group relations, and the prospects for durable peace. This study is situated within these critical debates. It argues that transitional justice, if it is to be meaningful in Kaduna State, must be locally driven, historically grounded, and critically aware of the limitations of both state and non-state actors.

Antiquity of Ethno- Communal Fragmentations in Southern Kaduna

To understand the post-conflict justice vacuum in Southern Kaduna, it is imperative to interrogate the historical roots of ethno-religious fragmentation and domination in the region. Long before the contemporary waves of violent contestations and demands for justice, Southern Kaduna had been the site of deep-seated political marginalisation, socio-cultural subordination, and religious exclusion. This condition is neither recent nor accidental; it is rooted in the political architecture established from as early as 1450 through to the 20th century. The institutional entrenchment of ethno-religious hierarchy began with the Sarauta system in Zazzau, intensified under the Emirate system (1816–1903), and was eventually consolidated through the British colonial Native Authority system (1903–1960), all of which imposed foreign administrative structures over diverse indigenous communities (Abdu & Umar, 2002; Augi, 1990). During this period, Southern Kaduna's ethno-religious communities predominantly non-Muslim and non-Hausa-speaking groups were subjected to coercive statecraft, forced integration, and cultural erasure through the instruments of indirect rule and emirate hegemony. These communities were deemed "pagan," and their decentralised political and religious systems were denigrated as inferior to the Islamic emirate structures centred in Zaria. The result was a persistent struggle for autonomy and cultural survival. This struggle was not only a reaction to military conquest or administrative reorganisation but a deeper resistance against the alienation of indigenous institutions and identities. As Ibrahim and Kazah-Toure (2003) contend, the resistance to domination gave rise to centrifugal tendencies that laid the groundwork for a sustained claim to religious, political, and economic self-determination among Southern Kaduna communities.

The ethno-religious stratification entrenched by the Hausa Bakwai system and the Emirate obligations of Zaria also produced a material and structural basis for violence. Zaria's designated role as a slave-supplying hub to northern Hausa principalities translated into the systematic raiding and subjugation of Southern Kaduna communities such as Lafia, Doma, Nassarawa, Keffi, and Jema'an Dororo which became strategic outposts for the extraction of labour and enforcement of emirate loyalty (Kazah-Toure, 1991; 1999). The reorganisation of these areas through violent annexation not only fractured local social systems but also recalibrated the boundaries of communal identities. The post-slavery restructuring of Zaria province divided it into two major administrative zones: the main division headquartered in Zaria, and the Southern Division headquartered across Kajuru, Kachia, and Zango Kataf later referred to officially as Southern Zaria (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Colonial administration in 1904 institutionalised these divisions by formally recognising Southern Zaria as a distinct geopolitical

unit. In colonial reports and anthropological texts (e.g., Smith, 1960; Otite, 1990), the Southern Zaria groups were repeatedly characterised as "tribal" and "pagan," while the northern half was praised for its centralised and Islamic political order. The Southern communities comprising districts such as Kauru, Kagoro, Jaba, Jema'a, and Zango Kataf were rendered subordinate in administrative arrangements and denied political parity, thereby reinforcing a racialised and religiously coded form of internal colonialism.

This subordination was further institutionalised through Nigeria's pre-independence constitutional arrangements, such as the Richards and Macpherson Constitutions of 1946 and 1951, which ensured that Southern Zaria remained politically marginal. In the 1951 regional elections, the area was only allowed a "special member" to represent its largely "pagan" population, confirming its inferior legal status within Zaria province (Abdu & Umar, 2002; Augi, 1990). These arrangements privileged Muslim Hausa-Fulani elites while denying other ethno-religious groups meaningful participation in governance. Such marginalisation also facilitated the carving out of Hausa enclaves in towns like Kagarko, Kauru, and Kajuru where the Hausa-speaking Muslim elite controlled religious, economic, and political life (Ibrahim, 1989). This historical subjugation was not only political but epistemic. It involved the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems, the suppression of local religious practices, and the delegitimisation of non-Islamic governance structures. The British, following their preference for centralised authority, idolised emirate institutions and dismissed the decentralised systems of the Southern Kaduna tribes as primitive or chaotic (Enwerem, 1995). Such colonial epistemologies laid the groundwork for a legacy of internal colonisation, which continued to shape perceptions of legitimacy, modernity, and justice long after independence.

This discourse not only shaped colonial administration but also justified the violent subjugation and exploitation of Southern Kaduna populations. British administrators, Christian missionaries, and Islamic authorities alike viewed the Southern Zaria peoples as a legitimate target for religious conversion, economic exploitation, and political containment. This was reinforced through institutional practices such as slave garrisons, discriminatory taxation, and the militarisation of Hausa strongholds in key Southern Kaduna towns (Ibrahim, 1997). Over time, these dynamics produced a myraid of exclusion in administrative, economic, religious, and cultural terms. As Suberu (1996) observed, the term "Southern Zaria" came to signify not only a geographical region, but also a subordinated political status and ethno-religious identity. The creation of Kaduna State in 1967 and subsequent administrative reforms did little to reverse these inequalities. Instead, they often reproduced colonial logics of control and exclusion under new democratic or military regimes (Akande, & Ojo, 2024). Hence, the contemporary ethno-religious crises in Southern Kaduna and the failure of the formal justice system to respond adequately must be situated within this longue durée of marginalisation, conquest, and resistance. It is within this deeply embedded context of grievance and historical injustice that contemporary calls for transitional justice gained urgency and traction. For the communities of Southern Kaduna, justice is not simply about prosecuting recent crimes, but about redressing a long history of

domination, exclusion, and violence a history that continues to shape identity, memory, and resistance across the region.

Based on the ethno-religious local population, dominated by a greater number of Hausa/Muslims, Southern Kaduna tribes/Christians seemed to have provided a natural boundary between the Northern and Southern Zaria (Ibrahim and Kazah-Toure, 2003). The River Kaduna's linguistic and cultural milieu have also left their imprint on the demarcation of Kaduna settlements. While Northern Zaria appears ethno-religiously homogenous, inhabited predominantly by the Hausa Fulani and the pagan Habe Maguzawa, Southern Zaria appears linguistically and culturally heterogeneous, comprising a congeries of ethno-religious groups, each rooted in a shared myth of origin, linguistic families, kinship patterns, political institutions, and indigenous religious beliefs and practices (Kazah-Toure, 1991; Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). Notably, the geographical compactness of Southern Kaduna's ethno-religious settlements facilitated the development of relatively homogenous and semi-urban enclaves. These include Kagoro township for the Oegworok, Manchok for the Asholio, Zonkwa for the Bajju, Samaru for the Atyap, Kwoi for the Ham, Kafanchan for the Fantsuan, Kamuru Station for the Bakulu, Fadan Kamantan for the Angan, Fadan Watai for the Aninka, Kufana for the Adara, and Gure for the Gbiri (Kazah-Toure, 1995). Such compact town-like centers, surrounded by smaller dispersed communities, have become loci of cultural preservation and continuity, enabling the survival of distinctive socio-cultural traits (Yusuf, 2007).

It is, however, important to underline that the impetus behind the formation of separatist group identities in Southern Kaduna lies not only in the spatial compactness and demographic weight of ethnic settlements like those in Adara-land, Atyap-land, Bajju-land, Ham-land, Oegworok-land, Agbiri-land, and Fantsuan-land but also in their historical resilience and deep-seated cultural cohesion (Kazah-Toure, 1995). The continual experience of exclusion, discriminatory governance, and cultural domination by more centralised groups particularly under the emirate and native authority systems deepened the sense of group identity and drove ethno-religious self-assertion. Discriminatory behaviours and attitudes by the dominant groups delayed meaningful institutional inclusion and reinforced the superior–inferior dynamics in intergroup relations, heightening the perception of political and social marginalisation among the peoples of Southern Kaduna (Egwu, 2001). For instance, in the Zangon Kataf district, the Kaje ethnic group protested vigorously against perceived Fulani domination under the Native Authority administration (Smith, 1960).

However, a significant shift began in the 1980s, when ethno-religious tensions in Kaduna State assumed clearer sectarian dimensions, marked increasingly by a Muslim versus Christian binary (Kazah-Toure, 1999). This period witnessed the outbreak of violent episodes such as the Kasuwan Magani conflict in 1980, the Zangon Kataf crisis in 1984, the Kafanchan religious riots in 1987, and a recurrence of the Zangon Kataf conflict in 1992 (Albert, 2006). The economic and political polarization between the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani and the largely Christian Southern Kaduna communities became more evident, giving rise to accusations of political exclusion, land dispossession, and unequal access to public goods. These historical fault lines

have entrenched schisms between the constituent ethnic and religious groups of Kaduna State, most visibly between the core Muslim North and the Christian South. Within this context, the prevailing situation in Southern Kaduna as a microcosm of political contestation, cultural resistance, and ethno-religious assertion in the state remains critical to understanding its vulnerability to communal violence within the broader spectrum of Nigeria's polity.

Community-Led Transitional Justice and the Politics of Recognition in Southern Kaduna

In the deeply fragmented ethno-religious landscape of Southern Kaduna, where the state's formal justice system (FJS) has consistently failed to offer redress, community-led transitional justice (TJ) mechanisms have emerged as both an alternative and a critique of institutional justice. These grassroots initiatives are not merely stopgap measures, they represent collective assertions of memory, justice, and belonging, which challenge the dominant narratives and exclusions sustained by the state and its allied elite networks. Given the protracted nature of violence in Southern Kaduna, TJ is not a discrete phase in a post-conflict timeline, but a continuous negotiation of justice within an environment where ethno-religious violence often resumes before it concludes. This creates a paradox: justice is pursued in a context where the perpetrators are still powerful actors embedded within state structures, and where institutional justice mechanisms remain unresponsive or complicit. Thus, community-driven TJ in Southern Kaduna is best understood as a form of "justice from below" a demand for recognition, accountability, and healing that is rooted in the lived experiences and epistemologies of affected communities. In the absence of institutional will or capacity to prosecute perpetrators, communities have turned to truth-telling forums, interfaith dialogue initiatives, memorialisation efforts, and documentation of abuses as means of asserting dignity and resisting erasure. However, these community-led processes do not operate in a vacuum. They unfold in a fraught terrain marked by contested state authority, ongoing threats of violence, and the strategic manipulation of ethno-religious identities by elites (Oyebode, Ojo & Ilonuba, 2024).

Moreover, attempts by CSOs to promote accountability are frequently met with resistance and repression. Members face arrests, surveillance, and delegitimisation, as state actors perceive their activities as threatening to the existing ethno-religious power arrangements (Kura, 2010; Wuye, 2008). The fraught relationship between the state and CSOs further complicates the prospects for durable peace, as it restricts civic space and delegitimises grassroots voices. Yet, the persistence of these organisations, often operating under extreme risk, signals a resilient commitment to localised forms of justice and peacebuilding, anchored in community trust and solidarity. As Obadare and Adebanwi (2009) argue, in ethnically and religiously divided societies like Nigeria, justice is not only about addressing past wrongs but also about renegotiating inclusion and citizenship. For Southern Kaduna communities, transitional justice becomes a demand not only for reparations and prosecutions but for recognition as full and equal members of the Nigerian polity. The erasure of their narratives in official discourses, the denial of their suffering, and the structural marginalisation they face, all contribute to a broader struggle for identity and symbolic equality (Ojo, 2022).

Therefore, in the Southern Kaduna context, transitional justice must be reframed not simply as a set of mechanisms for resolving past violence, but as a dynamic and contested field of struggle over memory, identity, and power. The Southern Kaduna case highlights the limitations of formal transitional justice in a deeply divided and unreformed political context. It underscores the need for context-sensitive, participatory, and transformative approaches that recognise the agency of victims and the legitimacy of local practices. In doing so, it invites a rethinking of transitional justice not as a linear transition from violence to peace, but as an ongoing process of negotiating justice in conditions of structural violence and contested nationhood.

Ethno-Religious Violence and Legal Redress in Southern Kaduna

A critical evaluation of redressing human rights abuses associated with ethno-religious violence in Kadudan State has lucidy depicted the limitation of transitional judicial approach. The formal justice system has attempted to pursue prosecutions against individuals allegedly responsible for large-scale atrocities in Southern Kaduna. These efforts have been framed as a national commitment to accountability, offering a semblance of legal redress for affected communities. Yet, the efficacy and legitimacy of such prosecutions remain deeply contested. In practice, these legal actions often fall short of expectations, delayed, selectively implemented, or entirely stalled due to political interference and institutional weakness. As such, the justice delivered through Kaduna's FJS has done little to rebuild public trust or disrupt the cycles of impunity that sustain ethno-religious violence.

The emphasis on legal prosecution as the primary TJ mechanism overlooks the broader, more transformative goals of justice in post-conflict contexts. While trials may symbolically affirm the rule of law and signal condemnation of criminal behavior, they are limited in their ability to repair fractured communal relationships or address the structural conditions that underpin violence. The people of Southern Kaduna remain skeptical of these legal processes, perceiving them as either ineffectual or complicit in sustaining ethno-religious hierarchies. Furthermore, these trials have rarely been accompanied by complementary TJ mechanisms such as truth-telling initiatives, reparations programs, or institutional reforms that could provide a more holistic response to the deep-rooted injustices in the region (Andrieu, 2010; Brankovic, 2010).

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have increasingly stepped into this vacuum, initiating alternative justice processes and advocating for broader reforms of the FJS. Their interventions have included community reconciliation efforts, legal aid to victims, documentation of abuses, and campaigns for legislative reforms. Yet, the effectiveness of CSOs is often constrained by the same structural obstacles that hinder the FJS. As Ikelegbe (2013) noted the success of CSOs does not simply depend on the tools at their disposal, but on how well these tools are adapted to the complex sociopolitical terrain of Kaduna State. Many CSOs have made critical contributions to raising awareness and mobilising communities, but their impact is uneven, often hampered by limited resources, security threats, and lack of political support.

However, even within CSO efforts, there is a tendency to focus narrowly on civil and political rights, while neglecting the broader spectrum of religious, cultural, and economic rights that are central to the lives of Southern Kaduna's communities. Addressing violations of civil liberties alone cannot fully account for the roots of ethno-religious conflict, which are deeply embedded in struggles over land, identity, representation, and belonging. The failure to integrate these dimensions into TJ processes risks reproducing the very exclusions that fueled the violence in the first place (Ikelegbe, 2013). In Southern Kaduna, the experience of victimisation is not just about the violence itself, but about the enduring disempowerment of communities who are denied access to land, resources, and political influence. Justice in such a context must grapple with these material and symbolic dimensions of exclusion. It must question who holds power, who is allowed to speak, and who determines the boundaries of justice. As Kura (2010) notes, without historical, ethnic, and religious reforms that directly challenge these hierarchies, the promise of TJ will remain unrealised. This demands a sustained, collaborative effort between CSOs, affected communities, and reform-minded actors within the state—an effort that recognises justice as both a legal imperative and a collective, ongoing struggle for dignity and peace.

Civil Society, Justice, and Peacebuilding in Southern Kaduna

In responding to the persistent ethno-religious violence in Kaduna State, particularly in Southern Kaduna, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have emerged as central actors within the transitional justice (TJ) landscape. As McEvoy and McConnachie (2013) argue, CSOs often represent the most proactive and community-grounded truth-seeking mechanisms. In the Kaduna context, they are constitutionally empowered to investigate past and present ethno-religious conflicts, facilitate public hearings, and issue recommendations aimed at both accountability and prevention. Over the past decade, numerous CSOs have been established across the state, serving as the only entities to conduct televised public hearings and community-based truth-telling efforts, particularly where state-led responses have failed or stalled (Suberu, 2001).

Despite these achievements, CSOs have sometimes been misunderstood or delegitimized, portrayed as adversaries of the state or as politicized institutions. This misrepresentation has undermined their work, even when their contributions to justice and peacebuilding have been clear and consistent. Unlike state-led legal proceedings, CSOs adopt a victim-centered approach, prioritizing the voices and experiences of survivors of ethno-religious violence. Their transparent, participatory processes ranging from public consultations to final reporting—help ensure that justice efforts resonate with local populations and enhance the credibility of TJ mechanisms. Indeed, the dysfunction of Kaduna State's FJS in confronting ethno-religious violence is well documented. Southern Kaduna's minority ethno-religious communities have long experienced systemic neglect and marginalization within the justice system, which has often failed to prosecute perpetrators effectively or provide redress for victims. The FJS has operated under the influence of dominant ethno-religious elites, showing little urgency or political will to interrupt cycles of violence.

CSOs should also contend with the legal and cultural barriers that discourage victims from reporting ethno-religious violence. Many survivors, especially from marginalized communities, are hesitant to speak out due to stigma, fear of retaliation, or distrust in the system. To overcome this, CSOs need to employ culturally sensitive, victim-centered approaches that protect identities and promote psychological safety. Anonymous testimonies, community-based counseling, and the use of trusted intermediaries for information gathering can enhance victims' willingness to participate in justice processes. Without such efforts, victims may continue to see TJ initiatives as elite-driven or disconnected from their lived realities. Most importantly, CSOs in Kaduna State should push for a non-kinetic approach towards addressing ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna with a view to combatting systemic and historical injustice in the country (Ojo, Adams, Okonye, & Olusanya, 2024). This consensus must translate into actionable frameworks for truth-seeking, justice delivery, and peacebuilding frameworks that are deeply informed by the voices and experiences of those most affected. Without this convergence of political will, legal reform, and civil society engagement, TJ processes remain fragmented and ineffective. Only by recognizing CSOs as legitimate partners in justice and peacebuilding can the cycle of ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna begin to be broken.

Conclusion

The persistent ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive, inclusive, and victim-centered transitional justice (TJ) framework. While the formal justice system (FJS) in Kaduna State has largely failed to respond effectively to these atrocities often constrained by political interference and systemic bias civil society organisations (CSOs) have stepped into the void, offering vital platforms for truth-telling, community engagement, and peacebuilding. Through their grassroots efforts, public hearings, and advocacy, CSOs have not only amplified the voices of marginalized ethno-religious victims but also pushed for accountability and structural reforms. However, their work is neither unchallenged nor sufficient in isolation. For TJ to succeed in Kaduna, it must be rooted in a broader societal and legal transformation that addresses historical injustices, dismantles entrenched ethno-religious hierarchies, and empowers minority communities. Justice cannot be achieved through prosecutions alone; it requires collective commitment to acknowledging past harms, reforming failing institutions, and building sustainable peace. In this context, CSOs are not merely facilitators, they are indispensable actors in reimagining justice, restoring dignity, and fostering reconciliation in Kaduna's deeply divided society.

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