From Marginalization to Militancy: Understanding Banditry through the Lens of Governance Failure in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The persistence and escalation of banditry in Nigeria—particularly across the country's Northwest region reflecting a deep-seated governance failure that has eroded the state's legitimacy and capacity to provide public goods. Far from being isolated acts of criminality, the widespread violence attributed to armed bandit groups exposes the structural weaknesses of governance manifested in institutional decay, socio-economic exclusion, and rural neglect. This study interrogates the link between governance failure and the evolution of banditry, arguing that the phenomenon represents not merely a security challenge but a systemic outcome of political, economic, and institutional dysfunction. Drawing on qualitative data generated from key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States, the research applies the theoretical lenses of Failed State Theory and the Political Economy of Violence to explain how state incapacity and structural inequalities have fostered violent non-state formations. Empirical findings reveal that the erosion of state presence in rural communities, elite corruption, youth unemployment, and the weakening of traditional governance institutions have collectively created conditions for the transformation of local grievances into organized armed militancy. Bandit groups have gradually evolved into quasi-political actors, establishing informal governance systems, imposing taxes, and controlling local economies in spaces where state authority has receded. The paper contributes to existing scholarship by providing contextually grounded evidence from community-level narratives, which are often missing in broader analyses of insecurity in Nigeria. Theoretically, it bridges the gap between structural governance failure and the informal political economy of violence, demonstrating how both reinforce each other in perpetuating instability. Policy-wise, the study advances an alternative framework that transcends militarized countermeasures by emphasizing inclusive governance, rural economic revitalization, justice sector reforms, and the reinvigoration of traditional and community-based institutions. It concludes that sustainable peace and security in Northwestern Nigeria require rebuilding state legitimacy through equitable service delivery, transparent leadership, and participatory development.

Keywords : Marginalization; Militancy; Banditry; Governance Failure; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Nigeria has witnessed an alarming and sustained escalation in violent banditry, particularly in the country's Northwest geopolitical zone. What initially emerged as sporadic incidents of rural criminality—such as cattle rustling or highway robbery—has metamorphosed into a pervasive and deeply entrenched security crisis with far-reaching socio-political and economic consequences. This transformation has been characterized by the expansion of criminal activities into a complex spectrum of violent practices, including large-scale armed robbery, systematic cattle rustling, arson, targeted assassinations, mass abductions for ransom, and indiscriminate attacks on rural communities (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Ibrahim, 2020). The scale and brazenness of these operations have intensified insecurity, forcing thousands of residents to

abandon their homes, collapsing local economies, and severely undermining agricultural production—the mainstay of livelihoods in the region—alongside educational systems and commercial networks (ACAPS, 2022).

The roots of contemporary banditry in Northwest Nigeria can be traced to long-standing patterns of rural insecurity, economic decline, and environmental stress. In the late 20th century, the region experienced increasing competition over land and water resources, aggravated by climate change, desertification, and population growth. These pressures intensified farmer–herder clashes, which over time eroded intercommunal trust and created an environment conducive to rural violence. By the early 2000s, cattle rustling had become more organized, with criminal networks targeting herders and traders along rural routes. Weak law enforcement, porous borders, and the proliferation of small arms allowed these groups to expand in scale and sophistication. The collapse of traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms, coupled with rising youth unemployment, meant that grievances were no longer mediated effectively, paving the way for cycles of revenge attacks. Over time, these localized conflicts evolved into a broader system of predatory violence—what is now recognized as armed banditry—drawing in a range of actors motivated by profit, survival, or political leverage.

The rise of banditry in Northwest Nigeria is symptomatic of the broader structural fragility of the Nigerian state and its chronic inability to fulfill the fundamental responsibilities of governance. As Rotberg (2004) posits, a state begins to fail when it cannot provide essential public goods—such as security, justice, and economic opportunity—to its citizens. In the Nigerian context, the state's persistent inability to assert effective control over extensive rural territories has created a governance vacuum that non-state armed actors have readily exploited. These groups not only challenge the monopoly of violence traditionally reserved for the state but also establish parallel systems of authority, dispensing "rough justice" and enforcing their own rules in the absence of legitimate state governance (Katsina, 2021).

Governance failure is thus central to understanding both the evolution and the persistence of banditry in the region. Many affected communities exist on the margins of state presence, experiencing chronic neglect in the provision of infrastructure, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. This neglect creates fertile ground for criminal exploitation and violent resistance (Agbiboa, 2022). Furthermore, elite corruption, entrenched patronage politics, and the politicization of the security sector have further undermined the credibility of state institutions. Security operatives are often accused of human rights violations, including extortion, extrajudicial killings, and collusion with criminal elements, thereby deepening public distrust and delegitimizing state authority (CLEEN Foundation, 2021).

The socio-political exclusion of rural populations—especially unemployed and underemployed youth—has generated a reservoir of grievances that armed groups have skillfully exploited. These groups recruit disaffected young men by offering immediate financial rewards, social recognition, and a semblance of belonging that the state has failed to provide (Oyegbile, 2021). Compounding this vulnerability is the weakening of traditional governance institutions, such as village heads, emirs, and community elders, who historically served as mediators in disputes and custodians of communal stability. As these institutions lose their authority due to political interference, generational shifts, and the erosion of customary legitimacy, an essential layer of localized conflict resolution has been removed, leaving communities more exposed to violent disorder (Bamidele, 2020).

This paper interrogates the intricate relationship between governance failure and the proliferation of banditry in Northwest Nigeria. It contends that framing the crisis solely as a law-and-order problem, solvable through kinetic military operations, is both reductive and ineffective. Rather, the phenomenon must be situated within a broader framework that recognizes state weakness, systemic rural marginalization, and the entrenched dynamics of structural violence. By drawing on empirical evidence from Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States, the study provides grounded community-level evidence that is largely absent in existing analyses, which often rely on secondary data or macro-level political explanations. Its unique contribution lies in integrating the Failed State Theory and the Political Economy of Violence to demonstrate how governance breakdown and informal economies of survival interact to sustain cycles of insecurity. In doing so, the study advances a contextually informed and empirically grounded understanding of banditry as both a symptom and a consequence of governance failure, thereby extending current debates beyond criminality toward structural reform and inclusive state-building.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical perspectives that provide a conceptual lens for analyzing the emergence and persistence of banditry in Nigeria: the Failed State Theory and the Political Economy of Violence**.** Together, these frameworks illuminate the structural and institutional roots of insecurity, shifting the focus from individual criminality to systemic governance dysfunction.

Failed State Theory

Failed State Theory offers a useful lens for understanding how the collapse or chronic weakness of state institutions contributes to the proliferation of armed violence. According to Rotberg (2004), a failed state is characterized by its inability to provide core public goods such as security, rule of law, basic infrastructure, and socio-economic welfare. In such contexts, the legitimacy of the state is eroded, and citizens increasingly turn to alternative forms of governance—often non-state actors or violent groups—for protection, justice, and livelihood.

In Northwestern Nigeria, the inability of the state to provide security and basic services has created vast ungoverned or under-governed spaces. Bandit groups have exploited this vacuum by positioning themselves as alternative centers of authority, sometimes offering rudimentary dispute resolution mechanisms or redistributive justice through looting and extortion (Rotberg, 2004; Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). The erosion of state legitimacy is further compounded by widespread perceptions of state corruption, impunity, and elite capture of political power (Katsina, 2021). As the state recedes, violent actors become more embedded in the social fabric, thus complicating efforts to reassert government control.

Political Economy of Violence

The Political Economy of Violence framework complements the Failed State Theory by focusing on how structural inequalities, economic exclusion, and access to resources contribute to the emergence of organized violence. This theory suggests that violence is not random but rather

shaped by political and economic incentives, often becoming an alternative livelihood strategy in contexts of extreme deprivation (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

Banditry in Nigeria is increasingly understood as part of an informal war economy that thrives on systemic poverty, weak state regulation, and the commodification of violence. Many perpetrators of banditry are young, unemployed men from marginalized communities who have been excluded from the formal economy and political processes (Agbiboa, 2022). For them, armed violence becomes both a means of economic survival and a form of protest against a state that has failed to meet their aspirations (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Moreover, the political economy of violence highlights how elites and state actors may also benefit from insecurity, either by diverting security budgets, negotiating covert deals with armed groups, or using insecurity to suppress political opposition (Keen, 2012). This dynamic contributes to the resilience of banditry, as powerful actors may have vested interests in the continuation of violence.

Synthesis and Relevance

Together, these theories underscore that banditry in Nigeria is not merely a security issue but a reflection of deeper governance pathologies. The weakening of state institutions, combined with socio-economic exclusion and the strategic use of violence by both state and non-state actors, creates a self-perpetuating cycle of insecurity. Applying these theoretical lenses allows for a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of banditry and offers a basis for developing structural and policy-oriented solutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of banditry in Nigeria has attracted growing scholarly attention over the past decade, reflecting its transformation from localized rural criminality into a multi-dimensional security, governance, and development crisis. Researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds—including criminology, political science, anthropology, and development studies—have sought to unpack its historical origins, structural drivers, and complex implications for both national stability and grassroots livelihoods. The literature spans a continuum from descriptive accounts of violent incidents to analytical works exploring the deeper political economy and governance dynamics. For clarity, this review organizes existing scholarship into four thematic areas: (1) conceptualizing banditry, (2) governance failure and insecurity, (3) socio-economic marginalization and youth militancy, and (4) the evolution of armed non-state actors in rural Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Banditry

In its simplest form, banditry is commonly defined as organized armed violence involving robbery, extortion, and attacks—often carried out by mobile groups operating in rural and peri-urban spaces (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). However, scholars increasingly caution against overly narrow definitions that strip the phenomenon of its political and social dimensions. Ibrahim (2020) and Aghedo (2022) argue that in contexts like Nigeria's Northwest—where state legitimacy is contested—banditry cannot be reduced to mere criminality. Instead, it embodies elements of political rebellion, socio-economic survival, and community-based vigilantism.

The concept is further complicated by the fluid identities of bandit actors. Individuals involved in banditry may at different times be petty criminals, hired mercenaries, community avengers, or informal security providers. This role-switching is often shaped by local grievances, survival imperatives, and the incentives created by weak governance structures (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Such complexity challenges the neat separation between "crime" and "conflict" in policy and academic discourse.

Comparative literature also highlights parallels between Nigerian banditry and historical manifestations of rural bandit violence elsewhere—such as the *social banditry* described by Hobsbawm (1969), where outlaws were sometimes perceived as community protectors against oppressive elites. This framing underscores the need to interrogate both the material and symbolic dimensions of banditry in Nigeria.

Governance Failure and Insecurity

A dominant theme in the literature is the centrality of governance failure to both the emergence and persistence of banditry. Nigeria's inability to exercise effective control over its peripheral rural territories—due to chronic corruption, weak state institutions, and poor service delivery—has created ungoverned spaces ripe for armed group consolidation (Bamidele, 2020; CLEEN Foundation, 2021). Agbiboa (2022) stresses that the erosion of state capacity to guarantee physical safety and economic stability has undermined public trust, prompting many communities to negotiate directly with bandits or adopt armed self-help strategies.

Security sector shortcomings are well-documented. Scholars and rights organizations point to inadequate training, poor logistical support, politicization of deployments, and the complicity of security personnel in criminal activities (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These deficits not only reduce operational effectiveness but also damage the legitimacy of state security institutions. The judicial system suffers similar credibility problems, with systemic impunity, prolonged legal processes, and inadequate victim support mechanisms (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2018).

Some scholars link these failures to Nigeria's broader political economy of insecurity, where violence is instrumentalized for political ends. In certain instances, elites have allegedly armed or shielded violent actors for electoral advantage, further blurring the line between governance and organized crime (Kuna & Ibrahim, 2019).

Socio-Economic Marginalization and Youth Militancy

The connection between youth disenfranchisement and the spread of banditry is a recurring focus of academic work. The Northwest region ranks among the poorest in Nigeria, with high illiteracy, low access to healthcare, and limited economic diversification. Unemployment and underemployment among young men, coupled with the absence of credible livelihood opportunities, create a large pool of potential recruits for armed groups (Iyekekpolo, 2021).

Okoli and Ugwu (2019) describe this dynamic as the emergence of a "bandit economy," in which violence is monetized through ransom payments, illegal taxation, and the sale of stolen livestock. This illicit economy is intertwined with local informal markets, making it resilient to conventional policing strategies.

Beyond economics, marginalization in the Northwest is also political and cultural. Traditional governance institutions—such as emirs, district heads, and community elders—have historically

mediated disputes, enforced moral codes, and provided channels for communal representation. Yet modernization, state interference, and internal legitimacy crises have weakened these institutions (Kuna, 2019). With their decline, rural youth lose non-violent avenues for grievance expression, increasing their vulnerability to recruitment into violent movements.

Armed Non-State Actors and Local Insurgency

Recent scholarship identifies a qualitative shift in the organization of bandit groups, from loosely organized criminal gangs to more structured armed non-state actors. These groups now exhibit territorial control, cross-border operational capacity, and sustained organizational hierarchies (Iroegbu, 2021). They impose illegal levies on rural communities, control access to farmlands, and use forests as fortified bases.

Some analysts note convergences between the trajectories of Nigerian banditry and those of insurgent movements such as Boko Haram. Campbell (2020) observes that while ideological motivations remain secondary for most bandits, the operational similarities—such as kidnapping for ransom, territorial control, and military-style raids—blur distinctions between organized crime and insurgency. There are also contested but persistent reports of tactical alliances between bandit factions and jihadist groups operating in the Sahel, raising concerns about regional security spillovers (ISS, 2021).

Synthesis and Gaps in the Literature

The reviewed literature reflects a significant shift in scholarly understanding of banditry—from episodic, localized criminal violence to a systemic expression of state fragility, rural marginalization, and socio-political breakdown. While conceptual clarity has improved, there remains a tendency to generalize from limited datasets, with many studies relying on secondary reports or urban-based sources. Field-based, community-level research that integrates local narratives into broader theorization is still relatively scarce.

This paper seeks to contribute to closing that gap by drawing on grounded qualitative evidence from Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States—three of the most affected states in Northwest Nigeria—to provide a more textured understanding of the interplay between governance deficits, socio-economic marginalization, and the evolving dynamics of armed banditry.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated political economy and governance lens to explain the persistence and transformation of banditry in Northwest Nigeria. The framework synthesizes insights from four interrelated thematic areas identified in the literature—conceptualization of banditry, governance failure, socio-economic marginalization, and the evolution of armed non-state actors—into a coherent analytical model.

The central proposition is that banditry in Northwest Nigeria is both a symptom and a driver of state fragility, sustained by a mutually reinforcing cycle of governance deficits, economic deprivation, and the adaptive strategies of armed groups.

1. Governance Deficits as the Structural Foundation

At the core of the model is the failure of governance manifested in the inability of the Nigerian state to provide security, justice, and basic socio-economic services. Weak institutions, corruption, and politicization of the security sector undermine state legitimacy and create ungoverned or poorly governed spaces. In these vacuums, non-state armed actors assert authority, enforce rules, and sometimes provide rudimentary "services" in exchange for compliance.

Key dynamics:

- Weak law enforcement and judicial systems → Impunity for violent actors.
- Corruption and elite complicity → Protection for some armed groups.
- Politicized security responses → Selective enforcement and public mistrust.

2. Socio-Economic Marginalization as a Recruitment Base

Economic deprivation—especially among rural youth functions as both a push factor (grievance) and a pull factor (incentive) for joining armed groups. High unemployment, low literacy rates, and the collapse of traditional livelihoods create a pool of individuals with limited legitimate opportunities. Banditry offers short-term financial gain, status, and belonging, filling gaps left by absent or weakened state and community structures.

Key dynamics:

- Poverty and joblessness → Economic vulnerability.
- Decline of traditional authority → Loss of non-violent grievance mechanisms.
- Informal "bandit economy" → Violence as a monetized livelihood strategy.

3. Adaptive Evolution of Armed Non-State Actors

Once established, bandit groups adapt strategically to state responses and market opportunities. Initially small and loosely organized, they may evolve into sophisticated armed non-state actors with territorial control, cross-border networks, and diversified revenue streams (e.g., kidnapping, illegal taxation, smuggling). This transformation increases their resilience and complicates countermeasures.

Key dynamics:

- Operational learning and tactical adaptation.
- Expansion from local to regional networks.
- Occasional tactical alliances with other violent actors (insurgents, militias).

4. Feedback Loops and the Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Insecurity

These three domains—governance deficits, socio-economic marginalization, and armed group adaptation—are linked by feedback loops:

- Insecurity further erodes governance capacity (e.g., displaced civil servants, abandoned police stations).

- Prolonged insecurity worsens economic decline and deepens poverty.
- Economic deprivation sustains recruitment into armed groups, which in turn fuels more insecurity.

This cycle creates a conflict trap (Collier, 2003) where each crisis driver reinforces the others, locking affected areas into chronic instability.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in a political ethnographic approach. The choice of methodology aligns with the study's objective: to explore how governance failure contributes to the emergence and resilience of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena where subjective experiences, community narratives, and institutional dynamics must be understood in context.

Study Locations

The fieldwork was conducted across three states severely affected by banditry: Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara. These states were purposively selected due to their high incidence of rural violence, displacement, and socio-economic vulnerability. Within each state, selected local government areas (LGAs) with known histories of bandit attacks were targeted.

TABLE 1. Study Locations

State	Selected Local Government Areas (LGAs)	Justification for Selection
Kaduna	Birnin Gwari and Zangon Kataf	Areas with repeated incidents of armed banditry, communal conflict, and large-scale displacement.
Katsina	Jibia and Faskari	Border LGAs experiencing high levels of cross-border attacks, cattle rustling, and abductions for ransom.
Zamfara	Shinkafi and Anka	Epicentres of sustained rural violence, illegal mining activities, and loss of livelihood sources.

The selected LGAs were purposively chosen due to their chronic exposure to banditry, displacement, and socio-economic vulnerability. Their diverse socio-political contexts provided a representative view of the dynamics of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria.

Sampling Techniques and Respondents

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed to identify respondents who possess firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon. A total of 72 participants were engaged. The table below shows the sampling techniques and respondents.

TABLE 2. Sampling Techniques and Categories of Respondents

Category of Respondents	Number of Participants	Justification for Inclusion
Community members and victims of bandit attacks	27	Directly affected by bandit activities and able to provide lived experiences of governance failure.
Traditional rulers and community leaders	9	Custodians of local governance and traditional conflict mediation systems.
Security personnel (military, police, vigilante)	11	Key actors in counter-banditry efforts and local security management.
Local government officials	6	Provide institutional and administrative perspectives on governance and service delivery.
Civil society actors, NGO workers, and humanitarian responders	10	Offer insights on community engagement, humanitarian response, and advocacy work.
Academics and journalists covering rural insecurity	9	Provide analytical, evidence-based, and media perspectives on banditry and state response.
	72	

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was used to identify information-rich participants with firsthand knowledge of banditry and governance challenges. This diverse respondent base ensured a balanced and multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon across state, community, and civil society levels.

Data Collection Methods

The study relied on three primary data collection techniques:

1. In-depth Interviews (IDIs)**:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and analyses of state failure and insecurity. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English and Hausa, depending on participant preference.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): A total of six FGDs (two in each state) were held with youth, women, and community elders to elicit collective narratives on the evolution of banditry and perceptions of state neglect.
3. Documentary Analysis: Secondary data sources such as government reports, NGO assessments, media investigations, and academic articles were reviewed to triangulate field insights and situate findings within broader trends.

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method widely employed in social research to ensure analytical depth and transparency (Spencer et al., 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach provides a systematic and dynamic framework for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across the dataset, emphasizing participants' perspectives.

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim and translated from Hausa into English where necessary. Transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software that

facilitated data organization, coding, and retrieval. The analysis followed the five sequential stages of thematic analysis outlined by Spencer et al. (2003):

1. Familiarization: The researcher carefully read all transcripts multiple times to become immersed in the data and identify emerging ideas.
2. Identifying and Determining Themes: Preliminary themes and sub-themes were developed from recurring issues and patterns within the data. These were entered into NVivo to establish a thematic framework.
3. Indexing (Coding): Qualitative coding was applied to all transcripts. Parent and child codes were created to structure the data into meaningful categories. NVivo was used to store, retrieve, and refine these codes systematically.
4. Charting and Summarizing: Data segments associated with each code were summarized and arranged into a matrix. Rows represented participants, while columns represented emerging themes or sub-themes. This process enabled cross-case comparison and synthesis.
5. Interpretation and Mapping: The final stage involved interpreting relationships among themes, grouping them into higher-order categories, and linking these to the theoretical framework. The process generated a coherent narrative connecting the findings to the study's research objectives.

To ensure rigor, reliability, and trustworthiness, several measures were adopted. First, inter-coder verification was conducted, with two researchers independently coding a subset of transcripts and comparing results to ensure consistency in interpretation. Second, peer debriefing sessions were held to review emerging themes and challenge potential biases. Third, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the analysis to document analytic decisions and reflect on researcher positionality. In addition, data triangulation was achieved by comparing insights from interviews, focus groups, and documentary evidence, enhancing both credibility and dependability These steps collectively strengthened the authenticity, confirmability, and transparency of the findings, reinforcing the study's overall analytical rigor.

Ethical Considerations

All respondents gave informed consent, and interviews were anonymized to protect their identities. Fieldwork was conducted with sensitivity to the volatile security context, and researchers worked closely with local facilitators and security operatives to ensure safety and cultural appropriateness.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The field data reveal that banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is not merely a manifestation of rural criminality but a symptom of deeper structural failures of governance. The findings are presented under five interrelated themes: (1) erosion of state presence and legitimacy, (2) elite corruption and neglect of rural development, (3) youth unemployment and survivalist militancy, (4) weakening of traditional institutions, and (5) emergence of violent informal governance structures.

Erosion of State Presence and Legitimacy

A dominant narrative across all three states was the absence or failure of government presence in rural communities. Many respondents described their areas as "abandoned by the state," especially in terms of physical infrastructure, security patrols, and judicial access.

> "There is no government here. We provide our own security, our own water, our own roads. Even when people are kidnapped, there is nobody to report to,"
> – Community Elder, Shinkafi LGA, Zamfara State.

This absence has created a vacuum exploited by bandit groups, who in some cases began as local protectors before turning predatory. The inability of security agencies to protect lives and property, coupled with delayed or zero state response to attacks, has eroded public trust in government institutions.

Elite Capture and Rural Neglect

Respondents across Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara repeatedly cited elite corruption as a driver of discontent. Funds allocated for rural development, livestock support, or local policing often do not reach their targets due to mismanagement and political patronage.

> "We hear of budgets every year, but nothing comes to our side. Politicians only remember us during elections. After that, they disappear,"
> – Youth FGD, Birnin Gwari LGA, Kaduna State.

This sentiment resonates with Agbiboa's (2022) argument that governance failure is compounded by elite complicity in rural exploitation. Development projects are often symbolic, not transformative, leaving communities trapped in cycles of poverty and resentment.

Youth Unemployment and Survivalist Militancy

The field data show that most bandit recruits are young men aged 15–30, with little or no formal education. Many respondents described the bandits as "our children" who turned violent after years of neglect, hunger, and unemployment.

> "They didn't start as killers. They were pushed by poverty. Now, they have tasted money from ransom, and it has become a business,"
> – Local NGO worker, Faskari LGA, Katsina State.

This aligns with Okoli and Ugwu's (2019) concept of the "bandit economy," where organized violence becomes a livelihood strategy. The militarization of poverty among Northern youth reflects a broader failure of state-led economic inclusion and job creation.

Weakening of Traditional Institutions

Another key finding is the decline of traditional rulers as intermediaries of peace**.** In the past, emirs and village heads mediated disputes and maintained order. Today, many have lost authority due to politicization, fear of reprisal by bandits, or co-optation by corrupt actors.

> "In the past, no one could steal a goat without facing the ward head. Now, even the ward head is afraid of the bandits,"
> – Traditional Leader, Zangon Kataf LGA, Kaduna State.

The weakening of these local institutions has dismantled the informal governance mechanisms that once buffered rural grievances, creating a power vacuum now filled by armed groups.

Emergence of Violent Informal Governance

A particularly disturbing finding is the emergence of bandit "taxation" systems in ungoverned zones. In parts of Zamfara and Katsina, farmers must pay levies to bandit commanders before harvesting or moving livestock. In some cases, women pay for safe passage to markets.

> "They [bandits] have their own rules. If you follow it, you are safe. If not, you are punished. They have become the government,"
> – Female Trader, Jibia LGA, Katsina State.

This reflects the emergence of violent informal governance, where non-state actors fill the role of state authorities through coercion. It also supports Iyekekpolo's (2021) argument that Nigeria is experiencing "fragmented sovereignty" in which state power is contested by armed actors who impose their own authority structures.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

These findings reinforce the argument that banditry is a rational response to historical marginalization**,** state incapacity, and elite exclusion. Using the failed state theory, we observe that the Nigerian state has lost the monopoly over violence and legitimacy in several rural areas, particularly in the Northwest. The political economy of violence framework further explains how banditry thrives as an informal economic system and power structure amidst institutional collapse.

Rather than isolated criminal acts, banditry represents a form of social resistance and informal governance that challenges the state's authority, especially when state agents are absent, complicit, or predatory. The failure to address the underlying socio-political and economic drivers perpetuates a cycle where violence becomes both a grievance and a livelihood.

CONCLUSION

The persistence and escalation of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria reveal more than a breakdown of public order—they expose the fundamental crisis of governance afflicting the Nigerian state. Drawing from qualitative fieldwork in Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states, this study has shown

that banditry is rooted in historical marginalization**,** state neglect, and systemic exclusion of rural populations. The Nigerian state's failure to deliver basic services, ensure justice, and uphold security in peripheral communities has created the conditions for violent non-state actors to emerge and entrench themselves as alternative sources of power.

The findings point to a deep erosion of state legitimacy, where public trust in institutions is supplanted by fear, despair, and grudging acceptance of bandits' authority. The confluence of elite corruption, youth unemployment, and the collapse of traditional governance systems has transformed banditry into an adaptive response to structural violence and inequality.

Crucially, this paper contests the dominant securitized narrative that frames banditry merely as a law enforcement problem. Instead, it demonstrates that governance failure—not simply criminal intent—is at the heart of the crisis. Therefore, any meaningful solution must extend beyond military operations and tackle the political, economic, and institutional roots of insecurity.

Recommendations

1. Reinvest in Local Governance and Rural Infrastructure
   The federal and state governments must prioritize inclusive rural development. Investment in rural roads, water supply, healthcare, and schools will begin to bridge the legitimacy gap. Restoring basic services can signal state presence and commitment to abandoned communities.
2. Strengthen Traditional and Community-Based Governance
   Traditional rulers and local institutions should be reintegrated into governance frameworks with clearly defined roles in conflict mediation, intelligence gathering, and peacebuilding. Efforts must be made to insulate them from partisan politics and re-establish their moral authority.
3. Implement Justice and Security Sector Reforms
   The current justice system is inaccessible, slow, and unresponsive to the needs of rural populations. Reforms should include mobile courts, restorative justice programs, and community policing models. Security operatives must be trained in civilian engagement and held accountable for abuses.
4. Tackle Youth Unemployment Through Targeted Livelihood Programs
   Comprehensive youth engagement strategies are essential to dismantle the recruitment pipeline for armed groups. Vocational training, agribusiness schemes, and microfinance access should be tailored to high-risk communities. Former bandit members should be reintegrated through disarmament and rehabilitation programs.
5. Address Corruption and Political Complicity
   Anti-corruption mechanisms must be enforced at the local government level where service delivery is weakest. There should be greater transparency in resource allocation for rural development and a crackdown on political actors who profit from insecurity.
6. Promote Regional Collaboration and Intelligence Sharing
   Banditry in the Northwest transcends state borders. Regional partnerships between Northwest states, supported by the federal government, should enable coordinated security responses, intelligence sharing, and joint socio-economic interventions.

By adopting a developmental and inclusive approach to governance, the Nigerian state can begin to reverse the tide of violence and rebuild its authority in the rural margins. Sustainable peace

requires not just disarming bandits, but restoring dignity, opportunity, and justice to the communities they have emerged from.

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