

Banditry as Political Economy: Violence, Extraction, and Subnational State-Building in Northwest Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a fresh look at the growing unrest in Northwest Nigeria. It sees banditry not just as a sign of a failing state or basic crime, but as a changing violent economic and political system. It goes beyond old ways of thinking to argue that violence is a tool used on purpose to gain wealth and show power. This has led to unofficial state-building by armed groups not part of the government. The paper looks at the many causes such as widespread poverty and lack of jobs for young people weak government control in some areas, and the easy access to guns and other weapons. It shows how violence is used to make money through mass kidnapping for ransom stealing large numbers of cattle, forcing farmers to pay, and taking over natural resources and trade routes. The study also shows how these groups that take from others have to make their own rules, provide security by force, and even settle arguments. This creates a separate system of control that goes against the usual government power. Using recent writings from 2020 and after, this study gives a deep look at this growing security problem and what it means for how the area is run. It suggests: (1) to deal with poverty through specific growth plans; (2) bringing back government control and make the official justice system stronger, and (3) disrupting the illicit financial networks that sustain the banditry political economy.

Keywords: Banditry, Political Economy, Northwest Nigeria, Violence, Extraction, State-building, Subnational Governance, Insecurity.

INTRODUCTION

The growing unrest in Northwest Nigeria has become a widespread and worrying issue for the nation and region. People used to see it as conflicts between farmers and herders, with some cattle theft. But in the last ten years, it's changed a lot. Now, the area faces what many call "banditry," a complex criminal business that goes beyond simple theft. It covers many types of extreme violence and forced taking of money or goods (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). This problem includes terrible acts like kidnapping large groups of students, villagers, and travelers often asking for huge ransoms. It also involves making scared communities pay for protection stealing cattle on a large scale which wipes out rural wealth, and destroying rural ways of life. These violent acts have caused great human suffering forcing many people to leave their homes and leading to many deaths. They've also hurt the area's social and economic life farming, which is crucial to the Northwest's economy (Kalu 2021; International Crisis Group, 2020).

Traditional analytical frameworks, prevalent in the early understanding of Nigeria's myriad security challenges, often cast banditry primarily as a direct symptom of state failure or merely as a simple, albeit severe, criminal enterprise (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2020). Such perspectives, while containing elements of truth regarding the state's diminished capacity, frequently fall short of grasping the intricate economic drivers and the emergent, albeit illicit and brutal, forms of governance that are now inextricably linked to this sustained criminal violence. This article argues that a comprehensive understanding of banditry in Northwest Nigeria requires moving beyond these simplistic interpretations. Instead, it advocates for conceptualizing banditry through the robust framework of political economy, where violence is not an aberrant outcome but a deliberate, calculated, and instrumental tool for wealth accumulation and the strategic projection of power. Paradoxically, this pursuit of illicit gain and control has inadvertently fostered the emergence of de facto subnational statebuilding processes, fundamentally reshaping local power dynamics and challenging the conventional understanding of sovereign state authority. By rigorously examining the intertwined mechanisms of violence,

extraction, and the subsequent profound reshaping of local authority, this paper aims to provide a more nuanced, empirically grounded, and theoretically robust understanding of this evolving and critical security challenge. The explicit focus on literature published from 2020 onwards is deliberate, ensuring a contemporary analysis that directly reflects the most recent scholarly insights, empirical observations, and relevant developments in this rapidly evolving crisis.

The Northwest region's journey into profound insecurity has been a gradual, yet accelerating one. For decades, the area grappled with intermittent farmer-herder conflicts, driven by competition over increasingly scarce land and water resources, exacerbated by climate change and demographic pressures (Adelakun & Adesoji, 2022; Umar et al., 2023). However, around the turn of the 2010s, particularly from 2011 onwards in Zamfara State, these localized clashes began to morph. Opportunistic cattle rustling, once primarily a feature of agrarian disputes, transformed into a highly organized criminal enterprise (Bashir, 2021; Abegunde & Adeyemi, 2022). This evolution saw the emergence of highly militarized groups, operating with significant firepower, conducting raids on an unprecedented scale, and moving vast numbers of stolen livestock across state and international borders (UNIDIR, 2024). This initial phase marked a critical shift: violence was no longer just about resource disputes but about pure, unadulterated economic gain through large-scale theft.

The most significant and devastating shift occurred around 2018-2019, with the widespread adoption of mass kidnapping for ransom (International Crisis Group, 2020; Al-Jazeera, 2021). This marked a new, highly lucrative chapter in the banditry saga, transforming the region into a hotbed of abductions, targeting not just individuals but entire communities, including hundreds of schoolchildren (Usman, 2021; BBC News, 2021). The strategic choice of kidnapping as the primary extractive mechanism fundamentally altered the nature of the crisis. It provided a direct, high-value revenue stream that required less logistical complexity than managing vast herds of stolen cattle and offered quicker returns. The scale of these operations, involving hundreds of victims and millions of naira in ransom payments, clearly indicates a sophisticated, well-coordinated criminal network rather than disparate groups of brigands (Amnesty International, 2022). This development signaled a "professionalization" of criminality, where violence became a highly effective means to extract capital directly from the populace and, by extension, from the state, which often pays ransoms through various channels to secure the release of abducted citizens (Premium Times, 2023).

Geographically, the crisis initially concentrated in Zamfara, has metastasized across the entire Northwest region, engulfing Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Niger, and parts of Kebbi and Kano States (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022; Gaskiya, 2023). This expansion underscores the adaptive capacity of bandit groups, their ability to exploit porous borders, vast ungoverned forests (such as the sprawling Kamuku, Kuyanbana, and Dansadau forests), and the generalized weakness of state security apparatuses (Oluwafemi, 2022). The interconnectedness of these groups, often sharing intelligence, arms, and even personnel, highlights a regional criminal ecosystem that operates with a high degree of impunity.

Conceptualizing Banditry as Political Economy

The term "banditry" itself has been subject to varying definitions, ranging from localized acts of robbery to organized criminal activities that destabilize large regions (Omitola et al., 2021). For this analysis, banditry in Northwest Nigeria refers to the systematic and organized violence perpetrated by armed, non-state groups, primarily for economic gain through kidnapping, extortion, cattle rustling, and resource control, often operating in ungoverned or weakly governed spaces (IJSSER, 2025; UNIDIR, 2024).

The "political economy" framework is crucial here because it emphasizes the interconnectedness of political power, economic interests, and social structures. It moves beyond viewing violence as an aberration, instead recognizing it as a means to an end within a broader system of resource accumulation and distribution. In the context of Northwest Nigeria, this implies that bandit groups are not merely opportunistic criminals, but actors engaged in a violent political economy, competing for resources, establishing extractive mechanisms, and in the process, carving out spheres of influence that challenge or even replace formal state authority (SpringerProfessional, 2024).

This perspective aligns with the Marxian Political Economy approach, which suggests that acts of banditry can be products of conflicts of interest, particularly where there is a perceived exploitation or neglect of certain social

classes (IJSER, 2025). High levels of unemployment, poverty, and a sense of marginalization among youth, particularly in rural agrarian areas, create a fertile ground for recruitment into these groups (ResearchGate, 2022; FUK Journals, 2025). The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), often linked to political thuggery and cross-border movements, provides the means for this violence (IJSER, 2025; IIARD, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the complex and escalating insecurity in Northwest Nigeria necessitates a robust theoretical framework that moves beyond simplistic characterizations of banditry as mere criminality or a direct symptom of state failure. This study posits that banditry in the region is best conceptualized through the lens of political economy, specifically a "political economy of violence." This framework foregrounds the intrinsic connection between political power, economic interests, and social structures, positing that violence is not an irrational byproduct of conflict but an instrumental, calculated tool for wealth accumulation, resource control, and power projection. Scholars like Paul Collier (2000) have illuminated how violence in resource-rich contexts can be economically rational for actors, while Mark Keen (1998) detailed the economic functions of violence in perpetuating conflict. In Northwest Nigeria, this perspective reveals how armed groups systematically employ mass kidnappings for ransom, large-scale cattle rustling, agricultural extortion, and control over natural resources and trade routes to generate immense illicit revenue, thereby making violence itself a profitable enterprise rather than an obstacle to economic activity.

This violent political economy thrives within the context of state weakness and limited statehood, which profoundly characterize the affected regions of Northwest Nigeria. Theories of fragile states (e.g., Rotberg, 2004) or regions of "limited statehood" (Risse & Lehmkohl, 2007) explain how the state's inability to effectively project authority, provide basic public goods, or maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force creates a pervasive governance vacuum. This vacuum is not a space but a contested arena where non-state actors, including bandit groups, expand their influence and establish alternative forms of control. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), often linked to regional instability and porous borders, further amplifies the capacity of these groups to exploit state fragilities (UNIDIR, 2024). The 'new wars' thesis (Kaldor, 1999) offers a relevant parallel, highlighting the blurring lines between war, organized crime, and large-scale human rights abuses, frequently driven by illicit economic objectives within contexts of weakened state structures.

Paradoxically, the sustained and pervasive nature of this violent political economy inadvertently leads to de facto subnational state-building by non-state actors. When the formal state retreats or fails to provide essential services, bandit groups, driven by the need to secure and expand their extractive base, often assume rudimentary governance functions. This resonates with Charles Tilly's (1985) historical concept of "protection rackets," where organized violence is leveraged to extract payments in exchange for security, a dynamic often mirroring the historical emergence of states from warlordism. In Northwest Nigeria, this translates into bandits imposing their own rules, collecting "taxes" or levies, providing swift (albeit brutal) dispute resolution mechanisms, and even offering a perverse form of "security" within their domains to protect their economic interests. This illicit form of governance challenges the state's fundamental sovereignty, leading to a complex landscape of "hybrid governance" where criminal actors exert significant authority and reshape local political and economic realities.

Drivers and Enablers of the Banditry Political Economy

The emergence and alarming entrenchment of banditry in Northwest Nigeria are not attributable to a single cause but rather to a deeply complex interplay of multi-layered factors. While many of these drivers possess deep historical roots, their impact, and exacerbation in recent years have created a fertile ground for the current wave of violence and extraction. This section delves into these critical enablers, demonstrating how socio-economic marginalization, profound state weakness, rampant proliferation of arms, and a distinct evolutionary trajectory have coalesced to form the enduring banditry political economy.

Socio-Economic Marginalization and Poverty: A Breeding Ground for Discontent

The Northwest region of Nigeria is consistently identified as one of the country's poorest, with staggering indices of poverty and alarmingly high rates of youth unemployment. This pervasive economic deprivation serves as a primary, enduring driver of banditry, rendering young people particularly vulnerable to recruitment by bandit

gangs who offer the enticing, albeit perilous, promise of quick wealth and social mobility (Umar et al., 2023; Abdulkarim & Usman, 2022). Many individuals, feeling profoundly neglected by both the state and the political elite, perceive participation in banditry not merely as a criminal act, but as a viable, albeit violent and illegitimate, pathway to economic betterment in an environment devoid of legitimate opportunities (Abegunde & Adeyemi, 2022). This sentiment resonates with findings from research indicating that a sense of exclusion and hopelessness often underpins engagement in violent non-state activities (Adegboye & Amzat, 2020).

The region's agrarian economy, historically the bedrock of its sustenance and livelihoods, has been severely impacted by a confluence of environmental and demographic pressures. Climate change, manifested in escalating desertification, erratic rainfall patterns, and prolonged droughts, has drastically reduced arable land and pasture (Adelakun & Adesoji, 2022; Gumi & Maidoki, 2023). This environmental degradation intensifies the pre-existing competition over shrinking resources, particularly between sedentary farming communities and nomadic pastoralists. While not the sole cause, this escalating resource scarcity has exacerbated communal tensions, which bandit groups skillfully exploit, often positioning themselves as "protectors" of one group against another, or simply preying on all sides (International Crisis Group, 2020). For instance, vast swathes of farmlands in states like Katsina, Zamfara, and Kaduna have become inaccessible or unsafe, leading to significant drops in agricultural output and income, pushing more people into destitution (Kalu, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicated that as of 2022, over 133 million Nigerians were multidimensionally poor, with a disproportionate number residing in the rural Northwest, where economic opportunities outside subsistence farming are virtually non-existent (NBS, 2022). This deep-seated economic grievance and the absence of viable alternatives create a fertile ground for recruitment, transforming poverty from a mere condition into a powerful push factor for violence.

Furthermore, the demographic bulge of a largely unemployed and uneducated youth population provides a ready pool of potential recruits for bandit groups. Lacking skills for formal employment and disillusioned by a perceived lack of government investment in their future, many young men see banditry as a means of acquiring status, power, and wealth that are otherwise unattainable (Usman, 2021). The 'rewards' – ranging from cash earnings through ransom, control over resources, to the acquisition of sophisticated weaponry – offer a stark contrast to the grueling and often unrewarding life of a rural farmer. This stark economic calculus, coupled with a deep sense of marginalization, underpins the willingness of many to join these violent enterprises, turning economic desperation into a critical enabler of the banditry political economy.

State Weakness and Ungoverned Spaces: A Vacuum for Illicit Governance

A critical enabler, perhaps the most fundamental, of the banditry political economy is the significant and prolonged weakening of state authority, leading to the prevalence of vast, ungoverned, or poorly governed spaces within the Northwest (Agwanwo & Nwanosike, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2020). Remote rural settlements, often geographically isolated and interspersed by extensive forests and rangelands (such as the expansive Kamuku, Kuyanbana, and Dansadau forests), are grossly under-policed and largely inaccessible to conventional security forces. These areas effectively transform into safe havens, staging grounds, and operational bases for criminal elements, allowing them to organize, train, hide victims, and store stolen goods with relative impunity (Oluwafemi, 2022; UNIDIR, 2024).

The porosity of Nigeria's extensive land borders, particularly with neighboring countries like Niger and Chad, further compounds this vulnerability. These borders facilitate the illicit flow of arms and drugs, and the unimpeded cross-border movement of criminal elements, making interdiction extremely difficult for overstretched security agencies (Adamu et al., 2021; IIARD, 2020). Smuggling routes, long established for legitimate and illegitimate trade, are repurposed by bandits to move weapons, loot, and even abducted persons. The sheer length and under-manpower of these borders mean that government efforts to control them have largely been ineffective, creating a continuous supply line for the banditry economy.

The inability of the Nigerian state to consistently protect lives and property, provide basic social services (like education, healthcare, and infrastructure), and effectively enforce the rule of law has created a profound governance vacuum. This vacuum is precisely what bandit groups exploit to establish their crude, yet effective, forms of control and extraction, filling the void left by state absence (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024; Kalu, 2021). Residents in these areas often report a complete absence of government presence for years, leaving them to their

own devices or, more often, at the mercy of armed groups (Amnesty International, 2022). This fosters a profound erosion of public trust in state institutions, compelling communities to either negotiate directly with bandits for their safety or resort to self-help mechanisms, further undermining formal state authority.

Moreover, persistent allegations of corruption within various layers of the security agencies and political structures significantly compound the issue. Reports from local communities and investigative journalism outlets frequently detail instances where security personnel are alleged to collude with bandits, tip them off about operations, or even directly benefit from the proceeds of illicit activities, particularly ransom payments (Premium Times, 2023; Channels Television, 2022). Such corruption not only erodes public trust but also actively hinders effective responses, creating a cycle of impunity and further empowering criminal elements. When citizens perceive that the very institutions meant to protect them are compromised, it deeply undermines any attempt to restore order or reassert state legitimacy. This pervasive corruption effectively acts as a lubricant for the banditry political economy, ensuring its continued operation despite intermittent military interventions.

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs): The Instruments of Power

The widespread availability and easy access to small arms and light weapons (SALWs) constitute a foundational and indispensable element supporting the violent nature of the banditry economy. The sheer quantity of illegal arms circulating within Nigeria is staggering, with estimates suggesting millions of unregistered weapons, far exceeding the capacity of security agencies to control (Adamu et al., 2021; Olayinka, 2020). This proliferation ensures that bandit groups possess the necessary firepower to overwhelm lightly armed or unarmed communities, engage security forces, and enforce their coercive demands.

These weapons are sourced from a diverse array of channels. A significant portion originates from illicit crossborder trafficking, particularly from conflict zones in the wider Sahel region, such as Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic, where state collapse and prolonged conflict have led to a flood of weaponry (UNIDIR, 2024; Adejumo et al., 2022). These weapons are often trafficked along well-established smuggling routes into Nigeria, exploiting the porous borders discussed earlier. Furthermore, military stockpiles, either through theft, corruption, or diversion, occasionally contribute to the illicit arms market (Premium Times, 2021). The local fabrication of rudimentary but effective firearms by artisan gunsmiths in various parts of the country also adds to the arms pool, providing cheaper and more accessible options for criminal groups (ThisDay Live, 2022). The presence of such a vast illicit arms market ensures that bandit groups can readily acquire sophisticated weaponry, including AK-47s, general-purpose machine guns, and even rocket-propelled grenades, which elevates their operational capacity and lethality (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The ease of access to sophisticated weaponry fundamentally empowers bandit groups. It lowers the barrier to entry into violent activities, making it easier for individuals to join or form gangs. More critically, it creates a stark power asymmetry between the armed bandits and the largely unarmed rural populations, allowing the former to terrorize, extort, and abduct with relative impunity. This superior firepower also enables them to challenge and often overwhelm local security forces, reinforcing their de facto control over vast swathes of territory. In essence, SALWs are not merely tools of violence; they are the fundamental instruments through which the banditry political economy operates, enforces its will, and sustains its extractive activities, transforming the landscape into one governed by the barrel of a gun.

Historical Context and Evolution: A Path to Professionalized Violence

While the current, devastating wave of banditry in Northwest Nigeria gained significant traction around 2011, particularly in Zamfara State, its antecedents can be traced to longer historical patterns of rural criminality, crossborder brigandage, and communal violence (Bashir, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2020). Early forms of insecurity were often characterized by localized cattle rustling, inter-communal clashes between farmers and pastoralists, and politically motivated thuggery, especially during election cycles (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2020). These initial patterns laid some of the groundwork, normalizing armed violence in certain contexts and creating networks of individuals familiar with illicit activities.

The turning point that transformed these disparate acts into the sophisticated criminal enterprise seen today can be situated around 2011, a period marked by heightened political tensions and the increased circulation of arms post-election violence (Oluwafemi, 2022). What followed was a gradual but discernible evolution:

- **From Cattle Rustling to Organized Crime (2011-2018):** Initial cattle rustling began to scale up, moving from opportunistic theft to highly organized raids involving hundreds of armed men. This phase saw the emergence of 'bandit' groups, often comprising disenfranchised youth from various ethnic backgrounds (predominantly Fulani, but not exclusively), who capitalized on the collapse of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms and the state's inability to protect rural communities (Abegunde & Adeyemi, 2022). This period established the economic viability of large-scale illicit extraction.
- **The Rise of Mass Kidnapping for Ransom (2018-Present):** The most significant evolutionary leap was the widespread adoption of mass kidnapping for ransom, which gained prominence around 2018-2019 (International Crisis Group, 2020). This shift signaled a "professionalization" of criminal operations. Kidnapping offered a high-value, relatively low-risk (given state weakness) extractive activity with quicker returns compared to cattle rustling. The success of early high-profile kidnappings, such as those targeting schools, demonstrated the immense profitability and coercive power of this tactic, leading to its rapid replication across the region (Usman, 2021).

Violence as a Mechanism of Extraction

Violence is not an indiscriminate act in the banditry political economy; rather, it is a calculated mechanism designed to facilitate and sustain various forms of extraction.

Kidnapping for Ransom

Kidnapping has become the most prominent and lucrative form of extraction for bandit groups in Northwest Nigeria. Entire communities, including schoolchildren, are targeted for mass abductions, yielding significant ransom payments (UNODC, 2020; UNIDIR, 2024). The systematic nature of these kidnappings indicates a well-organized criminal enterprise, with established networks for negotiation and payment collection. This direct extraction of wealth from individuals and communities demonstrates the coercive power of bandits and their ability to impose a direct tax on human life and liberty. The economic incentive behind this form of violence is clear: it offers a rapid and substantial return on investment in violence.

Cattle Rustling and Agricultural Extortion

Cattle rustling has evolved from petty theft to large-scale, organized operations that decimate the livestock wealth of communities (ResearchGate, 2022). This not only provides direct economic gain for bandits but also undermines the traditional livelihoods of pastoralists and farmers, exacerbating rural poverty. Beyond direct rustling, bandits often impose protection levies or "taxes" on farming communities, demanding payments in exchange for allowing farmers access to their fields or guaranteeing their safety (Kalu, 2021). Failure to comply often results in violent attacks, destruction of farms, or abduction. This system of forced taxation highlights the emergence of a parallel economic system controlled by bandits, where violence enforces compliance.

Control of Natural Resources and Trade Routes

There is growing evidence to suggest that bandit groups are increasingly involved in the control of natural resources, particularly artisanal mining sites, and key trade routes (ResearchGate, 2022). By asserting control over these areas through violence, they can extract rents, impose levies on miners, or tax goods transported along these routes. This diversification of extractive activities further embeds banditry within the local economy, allowing it to control not just existing wealth but also the means of its production and circulation. The ability to control these economic arteries demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of local economic geography and a strategic application of violence.

Violence as a Mechanism of Extraction

In the intricate political economy of banditry in Northwest Nigeria, violence is not an indiscriminate act of chaos; rather, it is a meticulously calculated and instrumental mechanism designed to facilitate and sustain various lucrative forms of extraction. It is the primary tool through which bandit groups generate revenue, assert dominance, and enforce their illicit economic order. This strategic application of force underscores that banditry is far more than random criminality; it is a coercive economic enterprise.

Kidnapping for Ransom: The Apex of Banditry's Economic Model

Kidnapping for ransom has unequivocally emerged as the most prominent, brutal, and lucrative form of extraction for bandit groups across Northwest Nigeria. The scale and frequency of abductions have escalated dramatically since 2018, transforming entire communities into hunting grounds for human capital. Targets range from individuals traveling on highways to entire villages, and most disturbingly, hundreds of schoolchildren were seized en masse from boarding schools. High-profile incidents, such as the abduction of over 300 Kankara schoolboys in Katsina State in December 2020, over 270 Jangebe schoolgirls in Zamfara State in February 2021, and the daring attack on the Abuja-Kaduna train in March 2022, which saw scores of passengers kidnapped, illustrate the audacity and operational capacity of these groups (International Crisis Group, 2022; BBC News, 2021).

The systematic nature of these kidnappings is stark evidence of a well-organized criminal enterprise. Bandit groups possess established networks for intelligence gathering, planning attacks, holding captives, and most crucially, for negotiation and the collection of ransom payments. Negotiations often involve intermediaries, including traditional rulers or prominent community members, blurring the lines between coercion and informal communication channels (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). Ransom payments, frequently amounting to hundreds of millions of Naira for large groups of captives, represent a direct and staggering transfer of wealth from individuals, communities, and in some cases, government coffers, into the hands of these criminals (Premium Times, 2023). This direct extraction of wealth from human life and liberty demonstrates the profound coercive power of bandits and their effective imposition of a terrifying "tax" on freedom.

The economic incentive driving this form of violence is exceptionally clear: it offers a rapid, substantial, and highly liquid return on investment in violence. Unlike cattle rustling, which requires significant logistical effort for managing and selling livestock, kidnapping delivers immediate cash flow. The repeated success of these operations, with most victims eventually released upon payment of ransom, perpetuates the cycle. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) highlighted the alarming rise in kidnapping-for-ransom as a primary source of funding for organized criminal groups in various regions, a trend acutely reflected in Northwest Nigeria (UNODC, 2020). This highly profitable model not only finances bandit operations but also provides significant personal wealth for commanders and their fighters, further entrenching the appeal of this violent enterprise amidst pervasive poverty. The psychological and social ripple effects are equally devastating, creating widespread fear, discouraging economic activity, and leading to mass displacement, further weakening the social fabric of the affected regions (Amnesty International, 2022).

Cattle Rustling and Agricultural Extortion: Undermining Rural Livelihoods

While kidnapping has surged, cattle rustling remains a core, albeit transformed, component of the banditry political economy. It has evolved dramatically from isolated incidents of petty theft into large-scale, highly organized operations that decimate the livestock wealth of communities, particularly pastoralist groups who rely entirely on their herds for survival (Adelakun & Adesoji, 2022; Umar et al., 2023). These operations often involve hundreds of armed men, equipped with vehicles and sophisticated communication, moving vast herds of stolen cattle across state lines and even international borders for sale in distant markets, demonstrating a complex logistics chain (UNIDIR, 2024). This industrialized scale of rustling not only provides direct, substantial economic gain for bandits but also systematically undermines the traditional livelihoods of pastoralists and farmers, exacerbating rural poverty and forcing many into destitution.

Beyond direct rustling, bandit groups have established a pervasive system of agricultural extortion, imposing protection levies or "taxes" on farming communities. These demands are often made in exchange for allowing farmers access to their fields, permission to harvest their crops, or a guarantee of safety from attacks (Kalu, 2021; Channels Television, 2022). The "taxes" can vary, ranging from direct cash payments to a percentage of harvested crops, or even demands for sexual favors from women and girls (Amnesty International, 2022). Failure to comply with these demands often results in brutal retribution, including violent attacks on villages, destruction of farms and homes, or the abduction of family members. This system of forced taxation highlights the emergence of a sophisticated parallel economic system controlled by bandits, where violence is the ultimate enforcement mechanism. Farmers, caught between starvation and extortion, are compelled to pay, effectively subsidizing the very groups that terrorize them. This economic subjugation not only siphons off wealth but also severely cripples

agricultural production, leading to food insecurity and further deepening the cycle of poverty and vulnerability in the Northwest (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Control of Natural Resources and Trade Routes: Diversifying Extractive Bases

The banditry political economy is continually diversifying its extractive activities, with growing evidence suggesting that bandit groups are increasingly involved in the control of natural resources, particularly artisanal mining sites, and key trade routes. This expansion of their economic portfolio deepens their entrenchment within the local economy and provides multiple streams of revenue.

In states like Zamfara, Kaduna, and Niger, bandit groups have asserted significant control over lucrative artisanal gold mining sites (HumAngle, 2021; Leadership, 2024). They achieve this through violence, expelling legitimate miners, or imposing heavy levies on those allowed to operate. In some instances, they directly engage in illegal mining, using forced labor from abducted victims or impoverished locals. By controlling access and imposing "taxes" on mining operations, they extract substantial rents from the informal economy. This diversification into resource control provides a stable, long-term revenue stream beyond the episodic nature of kidnapping, solidifying their economic base.

Furthermore, bandit groups frequently control key trade routes and highways that crisscross the Northwest, imposing arbitrary tolls on travelers, commercial vehicles, and traders (Premium Times, 2024). The region is a vital hub for trade connecting Northern Nigeria with the south and neighboring countries. By setting up checkpoints or ambushing convoys, bandits can demand payments for safe passage, seizing goods if demands are not met. This control over economic arteries demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of local economic geography and a strategic application of violence to regulate and extract from commerce. This not only generates income but also disrupts legitimate trade, inflates prices, and isolates communities, further demonstrating the pervasive reach of their coercive power. The ability to control these fundamental economic pathways allows bandits to extract not just existing wealth but also from the very means of its production and circulation, cementing their role as de facto economic overlords in the territories they dominate.

Subnational State Building by Non-State Actors

The sustained and pervasive nature of banditry, particularly its highly organized extractive operations, coupled with the profound weakening and, in many areas, near absence of formal state institutions, has inadvertently led to a deeply disturbing phenomenon: the emergence of de facto subnational governance structures exercised by these non-state armed groups. This represents a paradoxical and violent form of "state-building," where criminal violence, rather than legitimate authority or social contract, creates a semblance of order, rule, and even "justice" within their controlled territories. This challenges the very notion of state sovereignty and the state's monopoly on violence, highlighting the profound vacuum that criminal actors are increasingly filling.

Imposition of Rules and Taxation: Forging an Illicit Fiscal Authority

In numerous communities where the formal state's presence is minimal, fleeting, or entirely non-existent, bandit groups have begun to assert a rudimentary form of fiscal and administrative authority by imposing their own rules and regulations, often enforced through a system of coercive taxation. Beyond the one-off ransoms from kidnappings, communities are subjected to regular protection levies or "taxes" (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). These are not merely ad-hoc demands; they often become predictable, regular payments demanded from households, farmers, and even local businesses for the "privilege" of safety, access to farmlands, or simply to avoid violent reprisals (Amnesty International, 2022; Channels Television, 2022). Failure to comply can result in severe consequences, including forced displacement, the burning of homes, cattle rustling, or abduction.

These "taxes" effectively function as an illicit taxation system, granting bandits a form of de facto fiscal authority. For instance, reports indicate bandits dictating when farmers can access their fields, demanding a percentage of their harvest, or setting market days and imposing levies on goods sold (Kalu, 2021). They might also impose curfews, restrict movement, or ban certain activities like vigilante groups or traditional hunting, all enforced through the credible threat of violence (International Crisis Group, 2020). While entirely coercive and illegitimate, these payments and rules provide a perverse sense of predictability for communities, offering a grim

alternative to outright anarchy. This predictable extraction, enforced by armed might, demonstrates a rudimentary administrative capacity by the bandits, creating a parallel system of revenue generation and control that directly challenges the state's exclusive right to tax and govern.

Dispute Resolution and Justice Mechanisms: Filling the Judicial Vacuum

Perhaps one of the most insidious aspects of this subnational state-building is the extent to which bandit leaders have begun to act as arbiters in local disputes, effectively providing rudimentary "justice" mechanisms where formal state institutions have failed or are perceived as corrupt and ineffective (UNIDIR, 2024; Channels Television, 2022). In many remote communities, formal courts are inaccessible, slow, or prohibitively expensive, and local police may be absent or untrusted. In this void, bandit leaders, with their unquestionable capacity for violence, step in to resolve conflicts.

These disputes can range from land boundaries and communal clashes to petty theft, marriage disputes, or even resolving conflicts between herders and farmers. While their "justice" is often summary, brutal, and based on their arbitrary interpretations, it is delivered swiftly and, crucially, enforced. For communities desperate for any form of order, this swift and decisive, albeit harsh, resolution can be more appealing than the state's absent or dysfunctional alternatives (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). For instance, if a stolen item is reported to a bandit leader, they may swiftly recover it and punish the thief, often with public floggings or even executions. This visible enforcement of a crude "rule of law" within their controlled territories grants bandit groups a rudimentary form of judicial authority and deepens their insidious entrenchment within local social structures, further eroding the legitimacy and relevance of the formal justice system.

Provision of "Security" and Protection: A Coercive Monopoly on Violence

Paradoxically, in some communities under bandit control, there might be a noticeable reduction in certain types of crime *within* the controlled territory, as the dominant bandit group enforces a brutal form of order to protect its "economic interests" and prevent competition. This phenomenon reflects a warped, coercive monopoly on violence (International Crisis Group, 2020). Bandit groups understand that widespread chaos and competition from rival gangs or petty criminals can disrupt their revenue streams (e.g., if farms are looted by others, there's less to tax).

Therefore, they sometimes "patrol" their areas, punish internal theft, or even repel attacks from external bandit groups that infringe upon their "turf" (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). This perverse form of "security" is, of course, extracted at an unconscionable cost to communities: constant fear, loss of liberty, and systematic extortion. However, in the absence of any meaningful state protection, this coercive order can be seen as a desperate last resort for survival. It underscores the profound vacuum left by the state's retreat and how criminal actors can, by force, assume a fundamental state function: the provision of security, albeit one based on terror and exploitation.

This directly challenges the state's fundamental attribute of a monopoly over legitimate violence.

Legitimacy and Co-optation of Local Structures: A Blurring of Authority

The prolonged exposure to bandit rule and the absence of viable alternatives can lead to grudging acceptance, pragmatic compliance, or even the co-optation of traditional leaders and local community structures. Traditional rulers, community elders, and even some local government officials in affected areas are often forced to collaborate or comply with bandit demands, acting as intermediaries for ransom negotiations, collecting levies on behalf of the bandits, or simply acquiescing to their directives to ensure the survival of their communities (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024; Channels Television, 2022).

This complex and deeply uncomfortable relationship, driven primarily by fear and pragmatism, inadvertently bestows a certain, albeit illegitimate, form of "legitimacy" upon the bandit groups. When local leaders, who are traditionally seen as legitimate authorities, are compelled to engage with and even enforce the will of the bandits, it blurs the lines of authority for the populace. It normalizes the bandits' presence and deepens their entrenchment within local social and political structures (UNIDIR, 2024). This dynamic contributes to the emergence of "hybrid governance" arrangements, where formal state authority coexists (or fails to coexist) with powerful nonstate actors who exert significant control over local populations through a blend of violence and perverse

provision of order. This further complicates the state's efforts to reassert its authority, as the very local structures it might rely on are already compromised or integrated into the bandit's illicit system. The enduring challenge for the Nigerian state is not merely to defeat the bandits militarily but to dismantle this burgeoning, violent system of alternative governance.

Implications for State Authority and National Security

The political economy of banditry in Northwest Nigeria carries profound implications for the authority of the Nigerian state and national security.

Erosion of State Legitimacy and Trust

The pervasive insecurity and the state's apparent inability to protect its citizens from banditry have severely eroded public trust in government institutions (Kalu, 2021). When non-state actors effectively control territory, extract resources, and even provide a perverse form of "governance," the social contract between the state and its citizens is fundamentally undermined. This erosion of legitimacy can lead to greater non-compliance with state laws and a reliance on informal or illicit channels for security and justice, further weakening the state's reach (FUK Journals, 2025).

Economic Devastation and Humanitarian Crisis

The violent extractive practices of bandits have led to widespread economic devastation in the Northwest. Agricultural activities, the backbone of the region, are severely disrupted, leading to food insecurity, loss of income, and increased poverty (Kalu, 2021). This exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities and fuels a humanitarian crisis, with thousands displaced and living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps (ResearchGate, 2024). The diversion of resources to security operations, rather than developmental initiatives, further entrenches the cycle of poverty and insecurity.

Nexus with Other Insecurity Challenges

The political economy of banditry is not isolated. There are growing concerns about the potential nexus between bandit groups and other extremist organizations, such as Boko Haram/ISWAP, particularly through arms trading, logistical support, or ideological convergence (IIARD, 2020; UNIDIR, 2024). This convergence could significantly complicate counter-insurgency efforts and pose an even greater threat to national security, potentially creating a "land bridge" for jihadist groups across the Sahel.

Challenges to Federal and Subnational Governance

The banditry phenomenon presents a complex challenge to both federal and subnational governance. At the subnational level, governors and local government authorities struggle to assert control, often resorting to controversial negotiation tactics or relying heavily on overstretched federal security forces (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). At the federal level, the crisis diverts resources and attention from other critical national development priorities. The proliferation of policing models, including mainstream policing, hybrid approaches, and joint task forces, without a unified and effective strategy, indicates the difficulty in establishing a cohesive state response (ResearchGate, 2025).

Conclusion: Towards a Comprehensive Response

Banditry in Northwest Nigeria is a multifaceted crisis that transcends simple criminality. Its understanding as a political economy of violence and extraction, which inadvertently facilitates forms of subnational state-building, offers crucial insights into its persistence and resilience. The drivers of this phenomenon are deeply rooted in socio-economic marginalization, state weakness, and the proliferation of arms, while its mechanisms of violence are strategically deployed for wealth accumulation.

Addressing this complex challenge requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that moves beyond purely military interventions. Key recommendations, drawing from recent academic discourse, include:

- **Strengthening State Presence and Service Delivery:** Re-establishing legitimate state authority in ungoverned spaces through visible security presence, efficient law enforcement, and the provision of basic services (education, healthcare, infrastructure) is paramount (Kalu, 2021).
- **Addressing Socio-Economic Root Causes:** Implementing targeted poverty alleviation programs, creating sustainable employment opportunities for youth, and resolving long-standing farmer-herder conflicts through effective land management and dispute resolution mechanisms are essential to disincentivize participation in banditry (ResearchGate, 2022; FUK Journals, 2025).
- **Disrupting Banditry's Political Economy:** This involves not only kinetic operations but also financial intelligence to track ransom payments and illicit resource flows, as well as disrupting arms supply chains (ResearchGate, 2024).
- **Strengthening Border Security and Regional Cooperation:** Given the transnational nature of bandit operations, enhanced border surveillance and robust cooperation with neighboring countries are critical to stem the flow of arms and criminal elements.
- **Community Engagement and Trust-Building:** Rebuilding trust between communities and state institutions, fostering community-based intelligence gathering, and empowering local peace initiatives can provide sustainable solutions from the grassroots (Mahmud & Maigai, 2024).

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