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Unmasking Political Complicity in Armed Banditry: A Study of Elite Interests and Insecurity in Zamfara State, Nigeria (2019–2024)

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Abstract

The study observed that for the past five years, Zamfara State has been the epicenter of armed banditry in Nigeria with terrible effects for local people and state authorities. Moreover, the study also explained that the menace has numerous dynamics but, the potential part of political actors in maintaining or profiting from the violence has attracted increasing attention. This study looks at the connection between ongoing insecurity in Zamfara from 2019 to 2024 and elite activities in the state. It critically investigates claims of unofficial alliances, politically motivated talks and the instrumentalisation of violence throughout election cycles. Using mainly secondary sources of data that includes policy briefings, NGO reports, investigative journalism, studies by academics as well as elites theory. The study found out how armed groups and political elites have used insecurity for strategic gain given the erosion of confidence in official government institutions. The study concluded that there is the pressing need for honesty, institutional responsibility and a more thorough investigation of the manner in which politics drive the ongoing violent conflict in Zamfara State.

Keywords: Political Complexity, Armed Banditry, Elite Interest, Insecurity, Zamfara State.

Introduction

Zamfara State was once acknowledged for its abundance in agricultural, as well as mineral resources, and lively cultural legacy in Northwestern Nigeria for decades, which serves as proof of the perseverance and hard work of its people. But, in recent years, a rising tide of violence has pushed the state into one of the most unstable and dangerous regions in the country which has greatly

overshadowed this image. Since 2019, reports of mass executions, large-scale abductions, property destruction and the displacement of entire villages have become shockingly common place with a grim picture of a society under siege (Aina, 2023).

Although many underlying factors such as land and natural resource conflicts, youth unemployment, and the continuous

underdevelopment of security infrastructure have been acknowledged as contributors to this crisis, recent discussion is turning towards a more troubling side: the alleged participation of political actors either supporting or profiting from the violence. Civil society probes and investigative journalism are increasingly pointing to some politicians' direct or indirect links to the armed groups wreaking havoc all over the state. Ranging from sponsoring and negotiating with these groups for political influence to implicitly tolerating their activities through inactivity or strategic silence, these alleged links span (Barnett et al., 2022; Aina, 2023).

Though difficult to prove definitively, these findings raise unsettling questions about the relationship between power and violence in Zamfara State. Should political elites be complicit either through neglect or deliberate participation that not only aggravates the humanitarian crisis but also questions the legitimacy of democratic government and erodes public confidence in state institutions (Aina et al., 2023). For the average person, fear, disillusionment and a growing sense of abandonment are replacing confidence in the elected leaders.

In the same vein, considering the gravity and complexity of the issues, many academic studies on the political roots of banditry in Zamfara State remains rather limited. Much of the present studies stresses security responses or socio-economic justifications with little regard to the roles and interests of political elites (Hannatu, 2022). This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how political complicity and elite interests have shaped, maintained or exploited the insecurity in Zamfara between 2019 and 2024. Driven by a political economy viewpoint and based on Elite Theory, the study logically analyses secondary data to show how political actors deliberately or otherwise may have contributed to the continuing violence in the State.

In essence, the study seeks not only to advance academic knowledge but also to provoke a larger debate on responsibility, governance and the urgent need for open and inclusive political processes in conflict-prone areas such as Zamfara.

Statement of the Research Problem

Armed banditry is responsible for thousands of deaths, mass displacement and the collapse of local governance in various towns making Zamfara State one of the most insecure regions in Nigeria (Rufa'I, 2021). Though the Nigerian government and security forces have carried out various initiatives, the problem persists while in some areas it grows more acute. Along with growing public concern, several studies and reports have underlined a disturbing possibility that some political actors could be complicit in the violence either by negotiating with armed groups for political gain through providing material support or turning a blind eye to their activities in exchange for strategic benefits (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). Notwithstanding the seriousness of these claims, there is limited scholarly study systematically examining the political dimensions of the banditry crisis in Zamfara State. This difference makes it more difficult for us to understand the whole scope of the problem or to develop effective and responsible answers. Restoring peace in Zamfara depends on addressing this issue as much as it does on safeguarding democratic government and public confidence in Nigeria.

Objectives

- i. To examine the level of participation by the political actors in armed banditry in Zamfara State from 2019 to 2024.

- ii. To examine how political and elite's interests influence the state's response to the insecurity cause by banditry in Zamfara State.
- iii. To measure the impact of political complicity in banditry on public confidence in government and the integrity of democratic institutions in Zamfara State.

Methodology

Relying on secondary sources, this study uses a qualitative research method to investigate the political aspects of armed banditry in Zamfara State from 2019 to 2024. Rather than collecting field data, the study uses a broad spectrum of credible and varied sources including government reports, human rights documentation, policy briefs, academic journal articles and in-depth investigative media coverage. These materials were thoroughly chosen for their relevance, dependability and depth of knowledge regarding the crisis. The study finds through content analysis recurring themes and patterns suggesting possible political complicity, the interests of powerful elites and the character of the state's reactions to the growing insecurity. This approach enables a comprehensive and interpretive reading of the material enabling one to track how various narratives about the conflict have developed and evolved over time. The study provides a hinted and covered understanding of the political economy surrounding banditry in Zamfara by combining viewpoints from several documented accounts. The aim is not only to highlight the possible motivations and actions of political actors but also to consider how these dynamics influence public perceptions of governance and confidence in state institutions. The study aims to significantly add to the larger debate on political responsibility and insecurity in Nigeria by means of its findings.

Theoretical Framework

Elite Theory was first proposed by Vilfredo Pareto in the early 1900s that forms the basis of this study. The elite theory holds that a small number of people usually those with social, political or economic influence control decision-making processes in every society often putting their personal interests ahead of the general welfare. Pareto claims that by leveraging networks of influence and access to government resources, these elites shape policies and outcomes to maintain their supremacy.

Elite Theory helps to clarify how political actors in Zamfara State could be connected to the banditry problem in light of this inquiry. It offers a lens through which to see how some politicians could benefit from the instability either by negotiating informally with armed groups, manipulating the situation for electoral gain or gaining access to resources and contracts for security. The concept also underlines how the concentration of power among political elites might frustrate genuine efforts to fight insecurity therefore compromising democratic government and public trust. The study seeks to find the underlying political motivations possibly supporting armed banditry in Zamfara State using Elite Theory.

Literature Review

Armed Banditry in Zamfara State

As a transforming security threat over the past decade, armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest particularly in Zamfara State has undergone a disturbing transformation. What began as a series of localised clashes over land, grazing routes and cattle rustling has evolved into a highly organised, violent and deeply entrenched security crisis. As Rufa'i (2021) and UNIDIR (2024) argue, this shift reflects not only the growing sophistication of the armed

groups involved but also the failures of state institutions to respond adequately to the early warning signs. Today, banditry in Zamfara State is no longer the irregular, uncoordinated violence of the past. It has grown into a complex web of criminal activity driven largely by economic motives but not entirely devoid of social and political undertones. Armed groups now operate with a level of coordination that mirrors structured militias. They destroy farms and villages, steal livestock, kidnap men, women and children for ransom and extort entire communities (UNIDIR, 2024). Many of these groups have amassed large caches of weapons, established command hierarchies and even exert de facto control over certain rural territories setting up informal governance systems where the state is largely absent. Unlike insurgent movements such as Boko Haram or ISWAP, these bandit groups do not articulate a formal ideology or religious goal. Their violence is transactional, their motivations grounded in survival, greed and in some cases, revenge for long-standing grievances or marginalisation. Their rise has been facilitated by multiple structural breakdowns such as the weakening of traditional institutions that once mediated local disputes, the near-total absence of the state in remote communities and a law enforcement system that is poorly resourced, politically compromised and often seen as complicit (Hannatu, 2022.) What makes this crisis even more alarming is its growing entanglement with political and criminal networks. The porous borders of northern Nigeria and the unchecked proliferation of small arms have allowed banditry to spread rapidly (Okoli, 2024.) Meanwhile, in a disturbing trend, some bandit leaders have reportedly negotiated directly with state officials, accepted amnesty offers or entered into informal ceasefire agreements. While such deals may be presented as pragmatic efforts to reduce violence, critics argue they only legitimise and embolden the perpetrators rewarding violence rather than deterring it (Aina, 2023). The persistence of this crisis suggests that the roots of banditry run much deeper than poverty, unemployment or underdevelopment. It points to systemic governance failures, institutional decay and the troubling possibility that some within the political elite may have a stake in the status quo.

Political Complicity: Active Participation or Strategic Silence?

Political culpability in the banditry epidemic has become a more hotly disputed subject in policy and academic circles. Complicity in this situation, as Aina (2023) and Oyewole & Ojo (2023) argued, is the participation whether overt or covert of political players facilitating, sustaining or perhaps benefitting from the insecurity. Direct cooperation with armed groups or more subtle forms of strategic inaction and silence in the face of rising violence can both show this.

Political complicity accusations have emerged increasingly often in Zamfara. Particularly during election seasons some politicians are thought to have covertly financed or armed bandit organisations to threaten rivals or obtain influence in places outside the reach of legitimate governmental institutions. In other instances, informal pacts have allegedly been made between armed actors and local leaders for exchanges of peace for political support or immunity in return for loyalty. These backdoor deals turn bandits into instruments of political power and blur the boundaries between government and crime (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). Oyewole and Ojo (2023) call this "transactional governance", a process in which decisions about security are made not in the interest of public welfare but rather according to what best serves the short-term political objectives of those in power. In this setting, the use of security troops sometimes seems politically driven and selective.

While others especially those regarded as politically opposed or marginal are allowed to defend for themselves while communities affiliated with strong elites may get quick and forceful protection.

The failure of political leaders to take decisive action against bandits can be seen as a form of complicity. When credible allegations of coordination between politicians and armed organisations go uninvestigated or when no one is held accountable for gross security failings it sends a message that certain people are above scrutiny (Okoli, 2024). This undermines the rule of law and alienates people from their government even more by promoting a culture of impunity. For many populations, the state's inaction is not only a lack of ability but rather a deliberate political decision. Unpacking the core causes of fear depends on knowing political complicity. It lets us question how power, fear and political ambition interact to influence the dynamics of violence, hence transcending external justifications.

Elite Interests: Violence as a Tool for Maintaining Power

The question of involvement is intimately related to the function of elite interests in supporting the banditry crisis. Early thinkers like Pareto (1848-1923) indicate that elites whether political, economic or social often behave to maintain their supremacy even at the cost of more general society welfare. In Zamfara, elite interests are not merely ancillary to the crisis, they are profoundly ingrained in its structure and ongoing existence. State elites labour in dynamic networks of patronage and influence where insecurity is a resource to be controlled rather than a problem to be addressed. Some political players have been charged with using ties to armed organisations to interfere with votes in competing strongholds or to threaten adversaries during election cycles (). These groupings unofficially "militias" charged with obtaining political results become informal enforcers.

Elite power impacts how the government reacts to banditry outside of elections as well. While neglected or opposition-aligned areas face ongoing assaults with minimal state involvement, those with substantial elite presence sometimes gain from more regular security operations. Barnett J. et al (2022) propose that this deliberate distribution of governmental protection shows not only incompetence but also deliberate political design.

Economic exploitation has also been a result of insecurity. Oyewole and Ojo (2023) claim some elites have exploited the crisis to obtain profitable government contracts covering security logistics and armament acquisition. Often run via elite-controlled networks, international donor support and federal interventions meant to restore peace often raise questions about the distribution of public resources. In such a system, people at the top find political and economic survival in insecurity.

In general, a political economy of violence in which insecurity is not only a result of poor governance but also a result that favours particular players. For regular people, the expenses are catastrophic including loss of lives, broken communities and an increasing feeling of abandonment. For the wealthy, on the other hand, the catastrophe might be a tool for territorial control, state resource access and power consolidation.

Empirical Review

Increasing scholarly interest in the problem of armed banditry in Zamfara State has come from empirical research investigating its many origins and far-reaching consequences. Central to these questions is the awareness that banditry is a symptom of deeper socio-political dysfunctions rather than just a criminal event. The

literature highlights the interaction between changing security responses, political complicity, governance failure and poverty. These related elements create a sobering image of an area trapped in a cycle of violence, marginalisation and disputed authority. Mahmud and Maigari (2024) investigate the socio-economic factors fuelling armed banditry in Zamfara State. Their study offers a critical examination of how structural deprivation expressed in pervasive poverty, unemployment and restricted access to good education that has set the stage for the growth of criminal networks. They highlighted a long-standing neglect of rural areas where government presence is low and infrastructure is lacking which has left a vacuum which the bandit groups have taken advantage of. The researchers claimed that the inability of successive governments to carry out sustainable development policies has paved way for instability. Importantly, they argued that in some cases political elites have directly or indirectly helped to cause this. These leaders have usually given political expediency top priority over real security reform whether by appeasing armed groups to guarantee local political supremacy or ignoring their activities. Mahmud and Maigari find that until the fundamental economic and governance problems are methodically handled, real development will stay hard to find.

Hannatu (2022), echoing these ideas, adds a theoretical aspect to the study by applying Daniel Bell's "Queer Ladder" theory to the setting of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. Her research indicates that many bandits are motivated not just by material needs but rather by a deeper yearning for recognition, power and upward mobility in a society that has continuously marginalised them. Hannatu believes that, banditry can be seen as a kind of social protest against entrenched systems of inequality. Her results imply that many armed actors view themselves as opposing the current socio-political system rather than just committing crime. She also points out that sometimes political actors have secretly allied with bandit organisations using them as tools of political negotiation or coercion. These ties, she cautions, exacerbate the legitimacy crisis confronting the Nigerian state, therefore complicating the execution of real reforms or the restoration of public confidence.

Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) look at how non-state armed groups and state security forces interact in Zamfara State, therefore strengthening the idea of political interference. Although the Nigerian military has run numerous operations in the area which the report shows that political interference and logistical issues have regularly undercut their efficacy. Among the main discoveries is that some political elites supposedly affect the deployment and operations of security forces, steering them away from politically sensitive areas or impeding forceful actions against bandits with whom they are connected. The authors contend that this politicisation of security initiatives undermines not only the state's capacity to fight banditry but also public trust in the objectivity and competence of security agencies. The study advocates for a quick depoliticisation of security initiatives and the creation of more autonomous and responsible military operations.

On a more local level, Okoli (2024) focusses on the rise and development of vigilante groups especially the Yan Sakai, who run in different areas of Zamfara State. His research offers a dual picture of these groups, on one hand, they are viewed as community protectors, filling the security vacuum left by the state, while on the other, they sometimes operate outside legal frameworks engaging in extrajudicial killings and fostering cycles

of revenge. Okoli underlines how in certain situations vigilante groups have become politically significant, as local politicians cooperate with them to consolidate power or stifle dissent. He contends that this politicisation distorts the distinction between security and coercion therefore changing community self-defence systems into instruments of political control. The unregulated character of these groups raises important issues about the need of a formalised structure, legal control and professional training since it endangers civil liberties as well as the rule of law.

When considered together, these empirical studies, has expose the many-sided and deeply ingrained character of the armed banditry problem in Zamfara State. The results is a complicated story of state failure, political opportunism and social marginalisation rather than just one of criminal violence. Mahmud and Maigari (2024) emphasise the importance of inclusive development and economic reform, Hannatu (2022) highlights the psychological and symbolic aspects of banditry, Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) reveal the political manipulation of state security machinery, Okoli (2024) sounds the alarm on the dangers of unregulated local security forces. Grounded in fieldwork and regional knowledge, these revelations underline the need of a complete and depoliticised strategy to handle insecurity in Zamfara. Any sustainable solution has to be based on real responsibility, inclusive government and community-driven peacebuilding as well as awareness of the economic, political and social circumstances supporting the violence.

Discussion and Analysis

One cannot fully understand Zamfara State's armed banditry problem by focussing only on the violent actions of criminal organisations. Instead, it needs to be seen from a broader perspective that takes into account the intricate interactions between systemic security flaws, political manipulation and socioeconomic marginalisation. A self-sustaining cycle of violence, fear and impunity is produced by each of these layers supporting the others. The result is a deeper breakdown in the social contract between the state and its most vulnerable citizens rather than just a breakdown in law and order.

The Causes of Banditry and Socio-economic Factors

A critical entry point into understanding the rise of banditry depends in the lived realities of young people in Zamfara's rural areas. For many of them, poverty is not just an economic status, it is an identity marked by daily struggle, abandonment and a sense of being locked out of systems that promise growth and dignity. Mahmud and Maigari (2024) emphasise that a lack of access to education, employment and basic infrastructure creates an environment in which the prospects of upward mobility are painfully remote. In these neglected corners of society where the state is virtually absent, the line between survival and criminality becomes blurred. Hannatu (2022) examines how some people justify banditry as a means of obtaining respect, recognition and relevance in a system that provides them with no viable way forward by drawing on Bell's Queer Ladder theory. In this situation, joining a bandit group is a form of existential resistance for some people rather than just a decision motivated by violence or greed. It turns into a way to make oneself heard in a culture that has continuously ignored them. Growing up in a village with crumbling schools, non-operational health centres and roads that vanish during the rainy season makes the idea of using a gun rather than a pen to seize power seem reasonable.

The irony at the core of the banditry phenomenon is that the same young men who given the chance could have become farmers, teachers or small business owners now use violence as a means of subsistence. Their stories are more than just tales of individual criminality, they are a mirror reflecting the shortcomings of state policy.

The Structure of Complicity and the Function of Political Elites

An additional troubling dimension to the story is the role played by political elites in sustaining or facilitating the banditry crisis. Some politicians are intricately entangled in the web of violence that envelops Zamfara State far from being passive eyewitnesses. Political actors and armed groups have a range of relationships from active cooperation to tacit tolerance, according to Mahmud and Maigari (2024). Bandits are frequently permitted to operate freely in exchange for political allegiance, election-related silence or the destruction of rivals' strongholds. Tragic examples of political leaders using the chaos of insecurity as a political tactic, supporting or protecting armed groups to influence election results or control public opinion are documented by Aina, Ojo, and Oyewole (2023). What is revealed is a purposeful weaponization of instability rather than merely poor governance. Selective intervention, inaction and silence turn into methods of governance in and of themselves where power tactics masked as helplessness.

Citizens' perception that justice is not only elusive but also politicised is reinforced by the fact that state actors frequently fail to seek out or prosecute known collaborators. Communities lose faith in the government when they see this collusion. People start to view security as a favour that can be given or denied based on political calculations rather than as a right. The concept of democracy itself is undermined in such a setting and governance ceases to be a service and instead turns into a transaction.

The emergence of non-state actors and the inadequate security response

In cases where the state has made open attempts to combat the threat of armed banditry, political interfering and structural inefficiencies have frequently impeded these initiatives. Military and paramilitary security forces are often overburdened, poorly coordinated and underfunded in vast, challenging terrains. Deployment patterns frequently reflect political interest rather than strategic necessity, as captured by Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) in their study. While elite-favored areas receive prompt and forceful interventions, communities deemed politically inconsequential may be left to defend for themselves. Local vigilante groups like the Yan Sakai have emerged as a result of this void, initially viewed as grassroots defenders, they have since turned into contentious figures. According to Okoli (2024), a lot of these groups commit heinous acts of retaliatory violence which frequently aggravate tensions between different ethnic groups and communities. There are significant moral and legal questions raised by their unregulated status and sporadic political affiliations. They have occasionally been enlisted to act as private enforcers for politicians, intimidating opponents, influencing voters or guaranteeing election-related compliance. This demonstrates how the state's incapacity or unwillingness to maintain order has given rise to alternative security structures, some of which are just as brutal and unaccountable as the threats they purport to eliminate. Instead of calming the storm, these actors add new layers of unpredictability to an already volatile situation.

Interconnected Systems of Neglect, Power and Violence

This study create image of the crisis as intricately linked with state failure giving rise to alternative systems of violence and socio-economic hardship feeding political exploitation. The Zamfara State crisis is not just the result of armed criminals terrorising the State, it is the inevitable result of decades of institutional decay, elite manipulation and cumulative neglect. We can better understand why for some obtaining weapons is more than just a criminal act as it is a way for them to assert agency in a world that otherwise makes them invisible, as Hannatu (2022) frames banditry as a type of social navigation. While Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) trace the complicity of political actors who treat insecurity as a manageable nuisance rather than an existential threat, Mahmud and Maigari (2024) firmly locate the roots of this crisis in the absence of opportunity and dignity. Okoli (2024) reveals how even well-meaning attempts to use neighbourhood vigilante groups to close security gaps can be twisted and turned into political agendas. Rather than alleviating insecurity, these groups frequently end up becoming yet another sign of the underlying illness which is a system of governance where silence is a tactic and violence is currency. Therefore, more weapons, more soldiers or harsher laws won't be enough to stop banditry in Zamfara. A fundamental rethinking of justice, inclusion and governance is needed. Until the structures that alienate rural populations reward political complicity and tolerate impunity are dismantled, armed banditry will remain a permanent feature of life in Zamfara.

Recommendations

The government must start by tackling the underlying socio-economic factors driving armed banditry in Zamfara State if it is to properly solve this ongoing issue. Many rural areas have been neglected in terms of growth which has created a void that criminal groups take advantage. Programs aimed at poverty reduction, youth empowerment and inclusive education should be funded by the state government. Young people's attraction to criminal gangs drops greatly when they have access to meaningful jobs, microfinance possibilities and vocational training. These programs would not only restore dignity to impacted communities but also act as a long-term buffer against the appeal of armed banditry.

Apart from socio-economic changes, there has to be a revived dedication to political responsibility and efficient administration. The belief that political advantage can occasionally be manipulated by insecurity undermines public confidence and compromises group attempts to attain peace. Political leaders must be held responsible under strong anti-corruption policies. To guarantee they get to people who need them most, resources set aside for security and development must be openly controlled. It is simpler to organise community support in tackling security issues when people observe their leaders dedicated to justice and fairness.

Furthermore, reform of the security sector is absolutely crucial. To properly handle the complexity of armed banditry, the military and other security forces in Zamfara State require more coordination, more money, and more training. Security staff have to develop contacts with local people outside of their use of force. Encouraging cooperation between local people and security services can enhance intelligence collecting and provide a more reactive response to security concerns. A more coordinated and efficient reaction will be guaranteed by inter-agency coordination as well as synergy among federal, state and local administrations.

At last, proper definition and regulation of vigilante groups is essential. Though without appropriate control they run the risk of

becoming part of the issue, these groups are the first line of defence in many areas. The government should pass laws defining their function and guaranteeing their training in human rights, conflict resolution and community involvement. These organisations can significantly help peacebuilding initiatives under the appropriate backing and framework without aggravating violence or turning tools of political meddling. All these actions combined offer a complete strategy for bringing back stability and peace to Zamfara State.

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Conclusion

Armed banditry is a difficult issue in Zamfara State caused by a convergence of political elite cooperation, socioeconomic distress and lack of security. Political leaders who wish to maintain their authority may support or overlook armed groups, but the socio-economic challenges rural areas face create a perfect setting for their growth. The failure of the security system to properly handle the crisis aggravates the situation. Dealing with this issue calls for a thorough strategy addressing the underlying causes of insecurity, enhancing governance and the capacity of security personnel. Zamfara State can start to stop the cycle of bloodshed and instability by tackling the political and socio-economic concerns supporting banditry. While vigilante organisations are necessary, their influence has to be adequately controlled to prevent problems from worsening.

All things considered, the continuing armed banditry in Zamfara is more than just a security concern; it also reveals deeper socio-political issues that demand the involvement of the local people, political leaders and the government.

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