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Beyond Violence: The Political Economy of Banditry and the Transformation of Rural Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract

Banditry in Nigeria, especially across the North-West and into some parts of the North-Central zone, is typically theorized as a security or criminal-justice issue-one best tackled through the deployment of military and law enforcement forces. This paper contends that while this line of theorizing is not necessarily wrong, it is only partly right: in the contemporary Nigerian context, banditry has itself become an evolving, rural political economy that both extracts and redistributes revenue through cattle rustling, ransom kidnapping, informal taxation of farming and mining communities, and domination of rural trade corridors-functions that increasingly map on to those of the criminal and rebel governance networks documented in other, longstanding African conflicts. Drawing on the political economy of conflict literature-including greed/grievance theory and war-economy analysis-and on evidence-based understanding of the nature of Nigerian kidnapping, banditry, and human security, this paper unpacks the process by which chance opportunism and cattle rustling gave way to a diversified criminal economy, reviews the structural and governance conditions (competition over land and resources, proliferation of small arms, elites' absence and collusion) that enable the phenomenon, and analyzes what the inability to contain it through typical kinetic and negotiated approaches suggest about future responses. A new

approach to the latter must recognize that success, so far, depends on mitigating the sources of revenue and governance voids while addressing land and resources conflicts.

Keywords: banditry, political economy of conflict, rural insecurity, Nigeria, criminal governance, cattle rustling, kidnapping-for-ransom.

1. Introduction

Since the late 2000s, what began in Nigeria's North-West as localized cattle rustling between and against pastoralist and farming communities has evolved into a diversified rural criminal economy commonly referred to as "banditry," now generating revenue through mass kidnapping-for-ransom, extortion of farming communities, illegal mining, and control of rural roads across Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, and Niger states, with documented spillover effects on human security in other regions of the country (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020; Dami, 2021). The government and security-sector response have largely seen banditry as a matter of force imbalance – more troops, more hardware, and more kinetic action – and similar to how kidnapping insecurity has been generally addressed in other regions of the country (Dami, 2021). This paper contends that this kinetic framing while robust in explaining operational shortfalls misses a key dimension of the evolution of Nigeria's banditry: it is not episodic violence but a distinct evolving political economy, with a revenue logic, a set of informal governance functions, and a defined set of relationships with existing political economy structures. A political economy framing of banditry rather than a criminal-justice or counter-insurgency framing explains the durability of banditry despite recurrent military intervention and the types of structural reforms necessary for plausible reduction. The paper introduces a political economy framework for understanding armed rural violence, details the evolution of Nigerian banditry from cattle rustling to fragmented black economy enterprise, details the underlying structural drivers that perpetuate it, and details the limitations of both current kinetic efforts and negotiated solutions.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The political economy of conflict school provides a welcome critique to security-centric literature on armed violence. In the greed-grievance account of Collier and Hoeffler (2004), some combination of economic rents – looting, forced taxation, control of lucrative access to certain territories – can provide armed groups with incentives to sustain violence even after the grievances that spurred their creation have been rectified. Keen (1998) takes this observation a step further, by arguing that violence itself can become an end; for some actors, it is less a hurdle to be overcome than a source of rent. These rents may include extortion, protection money, and territorial gains through the control of land and trade routes, which would simply evaporate if conflict ended. More recent scholarship on rebel governance and organized crime echoes this insight, as armed groups – even in cases where their goals are explicit and purely criminal – routinely act as state-like actors, extracting taxes, settling disputes, and granting access to territorial resources (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). Applied to Nigerian banditry this theory leads to three testable expectations which organize the rest of the paper: (1) banditry should demonstrate signs of diversified income sources beyond the initial cattle-rustling; (2) banditry should demonstrate quasi-governmental characteristics (such as levy collection, control of access to farmland or passage, local

dispute settlement) in areas of the bandits' permanency; and (3) policies aimed at kinetic suppression alone will fail to produce results unless they also undermine the revenue and governance functions that sustain banditry.

3. From Cattle Rustling to Criminal Enterprise: The Evolution of Banditry in Nigeria

Contemporary banditry in Nigeria's North-West traces its immediate origins to escalating cattle-rustling disputes among and between Fulani pastoralist and farming communities in Zamfara and neighboring states, disputes that were initially small-scale and localized (Muhammad, 2024). Several converging factors transformed this localized phenomenon into a regionally networked criminal economy over the course of the 2010s. The proliferation of small arms in the Sahel after the fall of the Libyan state in 2011 dramatically expanded the availability and the price of arms for non-state actors throughout West Africa, a phenomenon well understood by regional security practitioners (Dami, 2021). Meanwhile, escalating desertification and depleted grazing land drove up competition for limited land resources among herders and farmers, creating an available narrative to serve as a recruiting tool and an underlying grievance to be exploited by early bandit groups (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). After being armed and organized, bandit groups expanded into these other types of revenue generating activities: kidnapping-for-ransom en masse targeting travelers, students, and rural residents; collecting what are de facto "taxes" or levies from farmers who need to pass through or harvest their fields; seizing and maintaining control over what becomes Zamfara's local gold-mining; and – probably the most common – charging toll or offering "protection" along rural roads (Muhammad, 2024). Such a diversification of revenue streams was predicted by the stated political economy expectation, in Sec. 2, that these groups would maintain their economic viability by continuously devoping the revenue generating capacity of new resources after their initial resource (cattle) was depleted, and represents a shift in the nature of this organized crime from episodic acts of banditry to regularized acts.

4. The Political Economy of Rural Insecurity

4.1 Land, Resource Competition, and Climate Pressure

Competition over increasingly constrained fertile land and pasture, exacerbated by the desertification associated with climate change in the extreme north of Nigeria continues to constitute a perennial structural driver that factors into the recruitment pool and territorial thinking of banditry, even as the phenomenon has evolved far beyond the origins of herder-farmer conflicts (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). The fact that bandit groups seek to maintain access to farming and grazing areas (rather than executing hit-and-run raids) underscores their quasi-governmental, territorialized attributes that the literature on criminal-governance identifies with prolonged non-state armed groups.

4.2 State Absence and Weak Rural Governance

Importantly, those regions where banditry is most prevalent are, and have long been, areas in which formal state capacity has traditionally been weak - with low levels of state administered security and policing, poor local government capacity, and limited rural infrastructure - all conditions conducive to

the expansion of informal bandit taxation and dispute-mediation mechanisms (Dami, 2021). This is in line with the Nigerian experience of rural insecurity more generally, as communities affected by kidnapping have generally reported increased dependence on local, informal security institutions in other parts of Nigeria (Muhammad, 2024).

4.3 Local Complicity and Political Patronage

A recurring and sensitive feature of the Nigerian banditry literature is the documented existence of local complicity and, in some accounts, political patronage networks that have historically armed or tolerated bandit-affiliated groups for electoral or communal advantage, only for those networks to escape effective control once armed (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). This pattern, in which armed non-state actors initially mobilized for narrow political purposes subsequently transition into autonomous criminal enterprises once demobilization or reintegration fails to occur, has also been documented in kidnapping-related insecurity in other Nigerian regions, suggesting it may be a more general feature of Nigeria's rural security landscape rather than one confined to North-West banditry specifically.

5. Consequences: The Transformation of Rural Insecurity

The transformation of banditry into a diversified rural political economy has correspondingly transformed the character of rural insecurity itself, in at least three dimensions. Economically, informal taxation of farmers and control of grazing and mining access have degraded agricultural productivity and rural incomes in affected areas, echoing the broader Nigerian pattern in which kidnapping-related insecurity has been shown to disrupt farming activity, reduce food availability, and raise local food prices (Muhammad, 2024). Socially, mass displacement from bandit-controlled rural areas has altered settlement patterns, concentrating displaced populations in more easily defended but economically marginal locations and disproportionately affecting women and children left more vulnerable to further victimization (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). At the institutional level, the growth of the bandit groups' functions of informal taxation and dispute resolution in the least state-populated regions has started to weaken the effectiveness of formal local governments, displacing it with a parallel and violent exercise of rural authority (Dami, 2021).

6. Policy Responses and Their Limits

Nigerian state countermeasures have been heavily kinetic, involving occasional large-scale military sweeps to clear the forest hideouts and weaken the bandits' operational capacity. The operations have yielded episodic tactical victories (blow up of hideouts, killing or arrest of commanders), but have not significantly reduced the overall incidence of banditry-a pattern consistent with the expectation of a political economy of armed groups: that ending the group's personnel and equipment has little impact if the revenue streams and state functions that support it are unaffected, leaving the group's economic rationale intact and poised for rejuvenation (Dami, 2021). Some state governments in the most affected areas have, at various points, pursued negotiated amnesty or disarmament arrangements with bandit leaders as an alternative or complement to kinetic operations; while such arrangements have occasionally produced temporary reductions in violence, their durability has been widely questioned where they have

not been paired with credible reintegration pathways or with measures addressing the underlying land, resource, and governance grievances discussed in Section 4 [confirm specific state-level amnesty programs and outcomes before submission, as this is a fast-changing policy area]. Read against the political economy framework outlined in Section 2, both the kinetic and the negotiated approaches share a common limitation: neither, on its own, addresses the revenue diversification, land and resource competition, or governance vacuum that this paper has argued underlie banditry's transformation into a durable rural political economy. A kinetic operation that destroys a bandit camp does not resolve the farmland-access competition that gave that camp's recruits an economic rationale for joining in the first place; a negotiated amnesty that disarms a specific commander does not, on its own, restore state administrative presence to the rural areas his group had come to informally tax and govern.

7. Toward a Political-Economy-Informed Policy Framework

A policy package along these lines, in addition to retaining existing armed capacity and equipping it with more modern weaponry, would also include three other – and not-kinetic – measures. First, formal and well-funded land resource conflict resolution structures for grazing and farmland disputes would address the grievances underpinning the recruitment and public buy-in upon which banditry has long relied (Asmau & Abdulrasheed, 2020). Second, improving rural service delivery and infrastructure, including local policing and dispute resolution mechanisms, as well as health, education, and other public services, would further push back against the space in which all these expanding grey/black economy activities have engaged in criminal banditry (Dami, 2021). Third, an industrial approach to undermining banditry's economic power, by deliberately targeting its diversification into illegal mining, smuggling, agricultural extortion, and what one might call strategic ransom, apart from military – is justified because of the greed-grievance and war-economy arguments outlined in Section 2.

8. Conclusion

The argument this paper has made is that the current perception of the expanding banditry phenomena in Nigeria, as episodic rural violence, misses the mark and it should be now conceptualized as a changing political economy that enables the proliferation of banditry, itself mirroring a plethora of revenue generation opportunities, according to the quasi-state monopoly over territory through territorial control and quasi-governmental functions, and reflect that it depends on the existing competition over land use at the local level, and where evidenced by at least a handful of documented cases, it is also an expression of political patronage. Why the re-framing has its relevance is because it recognizes the fact that the kinetic and negotiated responses that are being pursued in relative silos have failed to so far produce a durable reduction in the prevalence of banditry because they succeed to target the personnel and physical structure of the armed criminal groups but fail to challenge their revenue and governance vacuums, which enable banditry to persist as a viable and lucrative rural institution. A durable reduction in rural insecurity that banditry has come to be according to the paper's title, should therefore reflect a comprehensive grasp of the fact that banditry, to be practically eradicated, must be tackled as the hybrid phenomena, that as a political economy, is residing beyond violence.

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