STATE COMPLICITY IN THE PERSISTENCE OF BANDITRY IN ZAMFARA STATE, NIGERIA

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Keywords

Banditry, Governance Failure, Insecurity, Neo patrimonialism, State Complicity

Abstract

Research Problem:
Banditry has become a major security challenge in North West Nigeria, with Zamfara State emerging as a hotspot of persistent violent attacks, kidnappings, and cattle rustling. Despite several government interventions, insecurity continues to escalate, raising concerns about the possible role of state actors in sustaining the crisis.
Methods/Theory:
The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on documentary analysis of secondary data. It is anchored on the neo patrimonialism framework, which explains how informal networks and elite interests weaken formal governance structures and may facilitate criminal activities.
Results:
The findings reveal that banditry in Zamfara State is not only driven by socio economic factors but is also reinforced by state complicity through weak law enforcement, political interference, and policy inconsistencies such as amnesty programmes. Evidence suggests that some state actors, directly or indirectly, contribute to the persistence of insecurity.
Conclusion:
The study concludes that state complicity plays a significant role in the persistence and escalation of banditry in Zamfara State, undermining governance and public trust.
Key Contribution to Knowledge:
The study advances existing literature by shifting the focus from conventional explanations of banditry to a critical examination of state involvement, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the political

economy of insecurity in Nigeria.
Recommendation:
The study recommends strengthening institutional accountability, enforcing the rule of law, and implementing comprehensive security and socio economic reforms to address both the structural and governance related drivers of banditry.

Introduction

The North-West region of Nigeria has, over the past two decades, emerged as a major epicentre of rural banditry and organized criminal violence, posing serious threats to both regional stability and national security. Comprising states such as Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Jigawa, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara, the region has historically experienced recurrent conflicts between pastoralists and farmers over access to land and water resources. However, what initially manifested as localized communal disputes has progressively transformed into complex and highly organized forms of banditry, characterized by kidnapping, cattle rustling, armed robbery, and mass killings (Okoli&Ogajyi, 2018). Among these states, Zamfara has become particularly notorious, largely due to the convergence of illegal mining activities, weak governance structures, and entrenched socio-economic vulnerabilities that provide fertile ground for criminal networks.

While banditry is often conceptualized as a form of violent criminality driven by economic motives, such explanations tend to overlook the broader political and institutional dynamics that sustain it. Existing studies have predominantly focused on the operational patterns, causes, and security implications of banditry, with limited attention to the role of the state beyond its conventional function as a security provider. This dominant perspective assumes the state as either a neutral actor or a victim of criminal violence, thereby neglecting the possibility of its active or passive involvement in perpetuating insecurity.

Contrary to this assumption, emerging evidence suggests that state actors may, directly or indirectly, contribute to the persistence of banditry through policy failures, selective enforcement of laws, and, in some cases, tacit collaboration with non-state armed groups. In Zamfara State, for instance, government responses such as amnesty programmes for repentant bandits have generated significant controversy. While intended as conflict-resolution mechanisms, such initiatives have been criticized for legitimizing criminality, creating moral hazards, and incentivizing further violence (Nadama, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2020). Similarly, the inability or unwillingness of state institutions to effectively regulate illegal mining activities has enabled criminal groups to consolidate power and resources.

The notion of state complicitytherefore provides a critical analytical lens for understanding the persistence of banditry in Zamfara. State complicity, in this context, extends beyond direct involvement in criminal activities to include negligence, policy contradictions, and institutional weaknesses that inadvertently sustain violent networks. This perspective aligns with broader theoretical arguments that states can function not only as providers of security but also as facilitators of insecurity when governance systems are compromised (Ross, 2000; Amnesty International, 2018). The consequences of such

dynamics are evident in the scale of violence in the North-West, where thousands have been killed and millions displaced, with Zamfara remaining one of the most severely affected states.

Despite these realities, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the systematic examination of how state actions and inactions contribute to the endurance of banditry. Addressing this gap is essential for moving beyond descriptive accounts of violence toward a more nuanced understanding of the political economy underpinning insecurity in the region. Accordingly, this study interrogates the role of state complicity in shaping the trajectory of banditry in Zamfara State, focusing on how state policies, institutional practices, and governance failures may have enabled its persistence.

The central question guiding this study is: To what extent does state complicity contribute to the persistence of banditry in Zamfara State, Nigeria? By engaging this question, the study seeks to advance scholarly debates on insecurity in Nigeria while providing policy-relevant insights for designing more effective and accountable security interventions.

Statement of the Problem

Banditry in Zamfara State, Nigeria, has become a major security challenge, manifesting in organized violent activities such as kidnapping, rape, armed robbery, village raids, and cattle rustling. These criminal acts are often linked to underlying factors such as poverty, unemployment, and weak state institutions. The operations of bandit groups pose serious threats to national security, social stability, and economic activities within the state.

Banditry refers to the prevalence of armed violence and criminal activities involving the use or threat of force to intimidate victims for purposes such as robbery, abduction, or killing. It thrives particularly in rural areas where there are significant governance deficits and weak state presence (Olaniyan &Yahaya, 2016). In response, both the Federal Government and the Zamfara State Government have adopted various strategies, including military operations and community-based security initiatives, to address the crisis. However, these measures have yielded limited success (Barnett et al., 2022; Oyewole, Aina & Ojo, 2022).

In addition to military interventions, the Zamfara State Government introduced amnesty programmes aimed at rehabilitating repentant bandits through financial incentives and material support, with the intention of reintegrating them into society (Nadama, 2019). Despite these efforts and the substantial financial resources committed to combating insecurity, banditry continues to escalate. Reports indicate persistent incidents of cattle rustling, kidnapping, destruction of property, and attacks on civilian communities (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Scholarly arguments further suggest that states may, either directly or indirectly, contribute to criminal activities through acts of complicity. Such complicity may involve the funding of criminal groups, leakage of security information, or the protection of non-state actors for political or economic gains (Ross, 2000; Green & Ward, 2005). Despite these insights, there remains limited scholarly attention on how state complicity specifically contributes to the persistence of banditry in Zamfara State.

It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. Does state complicity contribute to the persistence of banditry in Zamfara State?

2. How do banditry activities affect socio-economic activities in Zamfara State?

Objectives of the Study

This study has both broad and specific objectives. Broadly, it examines the relationship between neo-patrimonialism and security challenges in Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Ascertain how state complicity contributes to banditry in Zamfara State.
2. Examine the effects of banditry on socio-economic activities in Zamfara State.

Literature review

State Complicity and Banditry in Zamfara State

Existing literature on banditry in Northern Nigeria largely attributes the phenomenon to socio-economic deprivation, weak governance, and environmental pressures. In Zamfara State, however, the dynamics of banditry reveal a more complex interaction between economic interests, political structures, and security failures. For instance, studies have shown a strong link between illegal mining and banditry, where actors involved in illicit gold extraction allegedly finance and sustain violent groups to create conditions that enable uninterrupted exploitation of mineral resources (Ogbonnaya, 2020). This suggests that banditry is not merely a product of poverty but is embedded within a broader political economy of resource control.

Empirical studies (e.g., Saminu et al., 2023; Gadzama et al., 2018; Nadama, 2019) identify factors such as unemployment, weak security infrastructure, proliferation of arms, and governance deficits as key drivers of banditry. While these studies provide valuable insights, they largely adopt a descriptive approach, focusing on causative factors without sufficiently interrogating the role of state actors in sustaining the crisis. Similarly, the role of vigilante groups, though initially framed as a community response to insecurity, has been shown to produce unintended consequences, including the escalation of violence and the emergence of competing armed factions (Rufai, 2018).

The political dimension of banditry further complicates existing explanations. Evidence suggests that competition among political elites over access to economic resources particularly mining sites has contributed to the manipulation of local conflicts and, in some cases, tacit engagement with armed groups (Yuguda, 2014; Danmaliki, 2014). This challenges the dominant narrative of the state as a neutral actor and instead points to a more problematic relationship between political authority and violent non-state actors.

State responses, including military operations, amnesty programmes, and peace negotiations, have also attracted critical scrutiny. While such interventions are often presented as pragmatic solutions to insecurity, scholars argue that they may inadvertently legitimize criminality and create incentives for continued violence (Walter, 2006; Nwangwu, Ezeibe&Onuoha, 2020). The repeated collapse of peace agreements in Zamfara, despite concessions such as financial rewards and reintegration packages for “repentant” bandits, raises questions about the underlying motivations and effectiveness of these policies (Abdulaziz et al., 2020).

Furthermore, structural factors such as porous borders, ungoverned rural spaces, and the proliferation of small arms have strengthened the operational capacity of bandit groups

(Ojewale, 2021; Ojo, 2020). However, these explanations, while important, tend to emphasize state weakness rather than state involvement. The possibility that elements within the state may benefit from or facilitate insecurity remains underexplored.

A critical review of the literature therefore reveals a significant gap. Although there is substantial scholarship on the causes, patterns, and consequences of banditry in Northern Nigeria, limited attention has been paid to the role of state complicitywhether through action, inaction, or policy contradictions in sustaining the phenomenon. By shifting the focus from bandits alone to the institutional and political structures that enable them, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of insecurity in Zamfara State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of Neo-patrimonialism, which explains the coexistence of formal legal-rational institutions with informal, personalized systems of rule. In neo-patrimonial settings, although modern state structures such as laws, bureaucracies, and administrative procedures formally exist, their operation is often undermined by informal networks, patron-client relationships, and the personal interests of political elites (Hansen, 2003; Szeftel, 2000a, 2000b). As noted by Osumah (2013), neo-patrimonialism represents an institutionalized fusion of formal governance structures and informal practices, where personal authority frequently overrides official rules.

A critical implication of this framework is that state institutions become instruments for advancing private interests rather than public good. This weakens accountability, transparency, and the rule of law, while promoting selective enforcement and governance deficits (Erdmann & Engel, 2006; Osaghae, 2007). In such contexts, the boundary between state and non-state actors becomes blurred, creating opportunities for collusion, protection, and mutual benefit. Consequently, insecurity may not merely reflect state weakness but may also be linked to the ways in which state actors manipulate or tolerate violence for strategic or economic gains.

This perspective aligns with arguments on state crime and complicity, which suggest that governments may be directly or indirectly involved in illegal or deviant activities. According to Ross (2000) and Green and Ward (2005), state crimes include actions carried out by, or with the support of, state officials, such as the funding, arming, or shielding of violent groups. Within a neo-patrimonial system, such practices are often embedded in patronage networks and political survival strategies.

Applying this framework to Zamfara State provides a more nuanced understanding of banditry beyond conventional explanations of poverty or weak security. It highlights how governance failures, elite interests, and informal power structures may create enabling conditions for the persistence of banditry. In this sense, banditry is not only a symptom of state fragility but also a possible outcome of state-enabled dynamics.

Thus, neo-patrimonialism offers a useful analytical lens for interrogating the relationship between state complicity and the persistence of banditry in Zamfara State, Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

This study engages two central concepts: state complicity and banditry, not merely as descriptive terms but as analytically linked phenomena within Nigeria's security landscape.

State complicity

State complicity, on the other hand, refers to the direct or indirect involvement of state actors in facilitating, enabling, or failing to prevent criminal activities. This may manifest through deliberate actions such as the provision of protection, intelligence leaks, or financial support to armed groups or through inaction, including weak law enforcement, selective justice, and policy inconsistencies. Rather than viewing the state solely as a victim or responder to insecurity, this study conceptualizes it as a potential actor within the security crisis.

Banditry

Banditry in the Nigerian context extends beyond ordinary criminality to encompass organized and sustained violent activities such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, armed robbery, and attacks on rural communities. While conventional explanations attribute banditry to poverty, unemployment, and weak governance, such perspectives are often overly simplistic, as they fail to account for the structural and political conditions that enable its persistence. Banditry, therefore, should be understood as embedded within a broader socio-political and economic system that both sustains and benefits from insecurity.

The intersection of these two concepts introduces a critical dimension often overlooked in existing literature. By framing banditry not only as a product of socio-economic deprivation but also as an outcome of state-enabled conditions, this study shifts the discourse toward a political economy perspective. This approach highlights how governance failures, elite interests, and institutional weaknesses may contribute to the persistence and normalization of violence in Zamfara State.

Methodology

This study is guided by the assumption that state complicity influences the persistence of banditry and socio-economic conditions in Zamfara State, Nigeria. To examine this relationship, the study adopts an ex post facto research design, which is appropriate for investigating phenomena where variables cannot be directly manipulated but are instead observed as they naturally occur.

The study relies primarily on secondary data, obtained through a documentary research method**.** Relevant information was sourced from academic journals, books, policy reports, government publications, and credible online materials. This approach allows for a critical examination of existing knowledge on banditry and the role of state actors within the context of Zamfara State.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, which involved systematic processes of reading, coding, classification, interpretation, and evaluation of the collected materials. This method enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships within the data, particularly in relation to political interference, governance failures, and economic incentives that may contribute to banditry.

In addition, logical analysis and theoretical interpretation were employed to draw meaningful inferences from the data. The study is informed by the analytical framework proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1999) and McNabb (2015), which emphasize the importance of generating insights through systematic interpretation of qualitative data. Similarly, Biereneu-Nnabugwu (2006) notes that such an approach is geared toward developing explanatory models that help to uncover

underlying dynamics within complex social phenomena.

In line with this, the study seeks to critically examine how factors such as political interference, economic motivations, and weak enforcement of state institutions may contribute to the intensification and persistence of banditry in Zamfara State. By integrating documentary evidence with analytical interpretation, the study provides a contextual and theory-driven understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For the purpose of this study, data were drawn from five Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Zamfara State that are most affected by banditry, namely Maru, Shinkafi, Gusau, Bukuyum, and BirninMagaji. These LGAs were deliberately selected due to the high frequency of violent attacks, kidnappings, and other criminal activities recorded between 2011 and 2022. This makes them critical locations for examining the relationship between state complicity and rural banditry in Zamfara State.

The study examines the role of state actors in banditry activities and presents a table highlighting high-profile individuals allegedly implicated in acts of complicity, particularly in relation to the granting of amnesty and distribution of incentives to bandits in Zamfara State.

Table 1: High-Profile State actors Indicted for Complicity in Armed banditry and Conflict in the Zamfara State

S/N	Category
1	Two Ex-Governors of Zamfara State
2	10 Military officers
3	15 Emirs
4	33 District Heads

Source: Mahmud & Maigari (2024), Zamfara Committee for Finding Solution to Armed Banditry.

The table above indicates that Zamfara State, which is strategically located and serves as a hub for cross-border trade with the Niger Republic, has experienced a significant decline in both economic and social stability due to persistent banditry. The findings suggest that banditry in the state is not solely driven by non-state actors; rather, state complicity plays a crucial role in sustaining insecurity.

Further evidence shows that some of the armed groups initially consisted of political thugs and mercenaries used during the 2015 general elections. Following the elections, many of these individuals were abandoned without adequate compensation. As a result, they utilized the weapons and logistical support previously provided by political actors to form organized bandit networks (Ejiofor et al., 2020).

These patterns highlight the interconnected roles of both state and non-state actors in

perpetuating banditry, thereby supporting the Neo-patrimonialism theory, which posits that state actors may engage in or facilitate criminal activities either directly or through intermediaries (Ross, 2000; Green & Ward, 2005). This perspective is further reinforced by statements from Governor Bello Matawalle, who noted that logistical suppliers and informants are the primary targets in addressing banditry, as their removal would significantly weaken the operational capacity of bandits (Daily Post, 2021) (Table 1).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study support the neo-patrimonialism theory, which conceptualizes state crime in terms of criminal, repressive, corrupt, and negligent state actions (Kauzlarich&Friedrichs, 2003). The results also align with the works of Yuguda (2014) and Danmaliki (2014), who reported instances where state officials were allegedly involved, directly or indirectly, in supporting bandits through the provision of resources such as money and livestock.

Similarly, Ogbonnaya (2020) observed that sponsors of illegal mining operations often finance banditry and cattle rustling in order to create conflicts that enable them to protect and sustain their illicit activities. In the same vein, Mohammed (2020) linked organized rural banditry in Zamfara State to illegal gold mining activities, facilitated by both state and non-state actors.

Therefore, these findings suggest that state complicity significantly exacerbates banditry in Zamfara State. The study further reveals that government interventions, including amnesty programmes and security operations, have yielded limited success. This is largely because political and economic interests often intersect with criminal networks, thereby undermining efforts to restore security. This situation reflects a deeper structural governance challenge that continues to perpetuate insecurity in the state.

Conclusion

This study has applied the concept of state criminality to explain the persistent occurrence of banditry in Zamfara State despite various efforts toward democratic governance and improved security. A major challenge facing any credible political system is the need for effective policies and programmes that are continuously reformed, a repositioned bureaucracy, and the active cooperation of both state and non state actors to ensure the protection of lives and property. This must be achieved in a way that eliminates banditry and related crimes such as rape, robbery, cattle rustling, and other forms of violence within the state.

Neo patrimonialism provides a useful framework for understanding this situation. It explains how the personal interests and preferences of political elites can undermine formal institutional structures of governance. In such a system, the core principles of good governance including accountability, transparency, citizen participation, efficiency, respect for laws, and equitable access to socio economic and political opportunities are often weakened.

The findings of this study support the neo patrimonialism perspective, particularly in relation to state criminality. Evidence suggests that some state officials may be directly or indirectly involved in supporting bandit groups through the provision of material and financial assistance such as food items, livestock, and money. These actions demonstrate how state complicity, whether through direct involvement

or neglect, contributes to the persistence and escalation of banditry in Zamfara State.

Recommendations

1. The study recommend that to end this criminal activities there is need for both the federal and state government to enact laws that will approved death sentence for any one involves in banditry business whether as financiers ,informants, or collaborators.
2. There is need to enhance effectiveness of security operatives through training and retraining of officers to meet the global security challenges.
3. Government need to be proactive in resolving security challenges and threats by new improved modern method of intelligence gathering and sharing intelligence, preparation, logistics, encouragement, and the implementation or advanced technology to address banditry challenges
4. Subnational and federal governments should prioritize building transparent, accountable, and effective state institutions capable of enforcing security, administering justice, and overseeing economic activities. Robust institutions reduce opportunities for elite capture of resources and mitigate the conditions that sustain banditry.
5. Investigations and prosecutions must target political elites, security personnel, and community actors found to facilitate banditry. Legal action against complicit actors will reinforce rule of law and deter the use of state resources for criminal purposes.
6. Socioeconomic interventions should address unemployment, poverty, and lack of essential services in rural communities. Providing alternative livelihoods reduces the appeal of criminal enterprises and promotes sustainable peace.
7. Illegal gold mining, cattle rustling, and other economic activities that finance banditry should be strictly monitored and regulated. Collaboration with local communities can help detect and disrupt networks that sustain armed groups.

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