

## Banditry and Insecurity: Are There Ungoverned Spaces in Nigeria?

Oluwaseun Kugbayi<sup>1</sup> , Adeleke Adegbamigun<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Public Administration, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria*

<sup>2</sup> *Department of Public Administration, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria*

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### Abstract

Many towns and villages in Nigeria have been experiencing bandits activities, vis-à-vis kidnapping, armed robbery, murder, rape, cattle-rustling, and violent actions in recent years. These activities have continued to escalate despite the presence of security agencies such as – the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Navy, the Nigerian Air Force, the Nigerian Police, the State Security Service, the National Intelligence Agency, and the Defence Intelligence among others. The unabated bandits' activities in part of the country depict a picture of ungoverned spaces, which suggests that there are territories that are experiencing a vacuum of political order. The study for that reason examines the connections between banditry and the ungoverned spaces, as well as, analyses the effects of bandits' activities on Nigeria and Nigerians. Using the discourse analysis that relies on secondary sources, the paper

argues that the inability to govern some territories adequately in Nigeria has created a vacuum for bandits' activities to thrive.

## Keywords

*Ungoverned spaces, Banditry, Insecurity, Conflict, Law Enforcement*

## I. Introduction

The advent of the fourth republic in Nigeria in 1999 birthed the return to civilian rule after decades of military rule. A new government was formed to see to the welfare of the people and to ensure security and peace. However, in the last two decades, several reforms have been made in many sectors, but it seems enough has not been achieved in the area of security. While the militants, avengers, and IPOB are terrorising the Niger Delta region, kidnapping in the west, insurgency in the northwest, and the ongoing banditry in the northeast and herders-farmers conflict in northcentral and most parts of the country. Consequently, many people have died, over three million people have been displaced, and the resultant long humanitarian crisis advances security risks (Ojo, 2020).

In the last few years, there have been an increase in insecurity in Nigeria. The northeast and northwest have experienced one of the worst cases of small and light weapon proliferation and also the large presence of military arsenals in the hands of the Boko Haram extremists and the Bandits. Although Boko Haram has been pronounced a terrorist group and a major counterterrorism exercise by the government and the subsequent soft approach in

curbing its activities have been instituted, this cannot be said about the bandits even though a large number of civilians have been killed by them in the last one decade. According to UN Human Rights Council (2021), the group between 2011 and 2021 killed more than 12,000 people, rustled more than 250,000 livestock, razed over 120 villages, and displaced more than 50,000 people. Several attempts have been made by the Nigerian government to address the situation ranging from the deployment of police and military under different code names like Operation Puff Adder, Sharan Daji, Hadarin-Daji, Exercise Harbin Kunama 111, Thunder Strike, and Diran-Mikiya. These operatives have yielded little or no results.

These operatives have destroyed several hideouts, pushed back attacks, and arrested hundreds of bandits, the disbanded bandits' hideouts, however, the banditry activities have continued. In several communities in the seven states of the northwest, bandits have graduated from dominating the forest to collecting taxes and food items from the populace. Although these spaces are within the territorial boundary of the country and maintenance of law and order in those spaces is sacrosanct, however, activities of the bandits in these areas suggest that those spaces are ungoverned. Although extant literature has detailed the precarious security situation in Nigeria with emphasis on the triggers of insecurity and their unequal consequences on men, women, and children (Hensen, 2017; Okoli and Ugwu, 2019; MacEachern, 2020; Anaele, 2021), much has not been done on the impact of rural banditry in governed and ungoverned spaces in Nigeria. It is in the light of the foregoing that this study used a qualitative approach to examine the connections between banditry and the ungoverned

spaces, as well as, analyses the effects of bandits' activities on Nigeria and Nigerians.

## II. Ungoverned Spaces: Conceptual and Theoretical Lenses

The concept of ungoverned spaces is defined as spaces that are ineffectively governed by the state. Taylor (2016) sees ungoverned spaces as the inability of the state to exert its power as the authoritative allocator of value, possessor of the monopoly of legitimate coercion and the provider of the collective good. Ungoverned spaces are seen as political, social, and economic territories functioning within the state where the legitimate authorities are unwilling or incapable to exert “effective sovereignty”. The political economy of ungoverned spaces maintains that integrating such spaces is of little value and may be too expensive or difficult to govern. For instance, it has not been easy for the government of Nigeria in governing its forests. Though the forests have long existed, in recent times, some of them have been invaded and controlled by terrorist groups.

Some have argued that contrary to the widely acceptable generalisation on the absence of governance in these areas, political orders in these areas have not disappeared, rather it is exerted by non-state actors like warlords, religious or traditional leaders, rebel organisations, and community leaders (Lake, 2009; Keister, 2014). Ungoverned spaces, therefore, exist in areas where the legitimate government has willingly or unwillingly surrendered its legitimate power, fully or partially to non-state actors whose actions may be harmful to the local or national peace. Sackflame

and Omitola (2022) then argued that the national security apparatus in such places are not potent in securing the territory and fulling governance in such places. It is therefore right to conclude that governance in such spaces is highly contested which makes it weak (Keister, 2014; Taylor, 2016; Onwuzuruigbo, 2021; Lenshie, Okengwu, Ogbonna and Ezeibe, 2021).

According to Clark and Mansour (2013), what is at stake in the discourse of the ungoverned spaces is the “spaces of contested governance and misgovernance”. Relying on the data gathered in Syria, they argue that the rationality is unsound because areas termed ungoverned are either ceded from the state or became ungoverned due to the absence of governance. They further argued that these spaces are not ungoverned. Rather, it is either these spaces are willingly abandoned, which place them under the sphere of mismanagement or they are not willingly abandoned which place such spaces under contested governance. In the case of contested governance, the state performs its legitimate function where the non-state actors are not in control but struggles with the non-state actors where they are in operation to perform its legitimate function. Igboin (2021) corroborates this argument that since the state does not voluntarily relinquish such spaces, the notion of misgovernance captures the reason for contested governance.

These contested ungoverned spaces harbor non-state actors. The non-state actors plan their operational activities in such spaces. They incite and mobilize forces for their expansion in such spaces (Djugumanov and Pankovski, 2013). From these spaces, they “establish themselves, consolidate, plan, organise, fundraise, recruit, train, and operate” (Clark and Mansour 2013). This enables the non-state actor to have a base of operation.

Then, this is the point, whether ungoverned spaces are assessed from the angle of mismanagement or contested governance, a substantial portion of the forests in Nigeria are not only qualified to be called ungoverned spaces but also serve as a haven for the non-state actors, whose activities have been injurious to the existence of the Nigeria state. The rainforests in the Niger-Delta host illegal oil bunkers, pipeline vandals, thieves, and other insurgent groups involved in the struggle for the control of oil resources. Forests in the Western and Eastern parts of the country have been havens to armed robbers, kidnappers, ritualists, smugglers, and robbers. In the North, the Sambisa Forest in the Northeast has been the house of the Boko Haram extremist group for more than a decade. The Gundami forest in Zamfara, Kagoro–Nindam forest in Kaduna, and Kuyanbana forest, where Niger, Kaduna, and Kebbi states among others can be accessed have accommodated the cattle rustlers, kidnappers, cattle rustlers, and armed bandits (Olaniyan, 2018). The non-state actors like bandits and Boko Haram extremists among others make use of these spaces as havens. They mobilise forces from these spaces and launch out to the governed spaces to claim more spaces.

### III. Explaining Banditry in Ungoverned Spaces in Nigeria

Banditry generally, is a loosely defined concept. Banditry in Nigeria involves armed violence aimed at human life and property by criminal actors (Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014). Bandits in Nigeria engage in criminality such as looting of villages, kidnapping for ransom, extortion of local communities, armed robbery, cattle

rustling, and related armed violence. Banditry activities have been prevalent in the northwest zone of the country but have grown extensively in Zamfara state in the last decade (Gadzama, Saddiq, Oduhie, and Dariya, 2018). Extant literature has documented the different perspectives on the reason for the rise of criminality and banditry in Nigeria. The first school of thought argues that politicians armed and sponsored youths in the 2011 election and failed to recover the arms given to them in the preselection period. The politicians abandoned the thugs in the post-election era, who then went into cattle stealing, robbery, drug abuse and later transformed into armed gangs terrorising villages (Gadzama, Saddiq, Oduhie, and Dariya, 2018). The position is strengthened by the position of Rafai (2021) that the first set of motorbikes used for attacks for banditry activities mist especially in Zamfara state are donated by politicians in the buildup to the 2011 elections.

Another school of thought argues that the banditry springs up as a response to injustice against the agro-pastoral communities (Shettima & Tar, 2008; Olaniyan & Yahaya 2016; Okoli and Abubakar, 2021). In line with this position is the narrative that bandits started from the mercenary fighters who fought and defend the herders in their confrontation with the farmers. Rufai (2021) argues that at the formative stage, the goal of the group was to ensure the oneness of the herders in their quest for social justice (Rufai, 2021). This perspective holds that the mercenary fighters later turned to criminals who started with cattle rustling and later turned to kidnapers (International Crisis Group, 2020).

These narratives are important to the understanding of the development of banditry. However, they may not be right because arguments exist in the literature that the colonial government in the pre-independent era also responded to the menace of rural

banditry by deploring policemen to the strategic locations across Sokoto province to curb the act and other cross border crimes in the province (Garba, 2021). Whatever the sources of banditry are, they have become a major security concern in Nigeria, with the northwest geopolitical zone as the epicentre.

Thousands have died in the northwest zone as a result of banditry. In recent years the situation has degenerated with gangs kidnapping for ransom, laying ambush for travelers, and looting of villages. Villagers across the states in the zone claim they pay tax to the bandits to avoid violence occurrence (Ladan and Matawalli, 2021). The report of a committee set up by the Zamfara state government to investigate the activities of the bandits claimed that between 2011 and 2019 report that about 6,319 people died; 4000 kidnapped; N2, 805,049,748 ransom paid; 6, 483 widows and 25,000 orphans were left behind by the victims in the period. The report also shows that more than 21,000 cows, 141,000 sheep, and about 20,000 donkeys and camels rustled. More than 3587 houses and 1400 motorcycles and vehicles were burnt (Adegboruwa, 2021).

Virtually all the states in the northwest are affected by banditry. In Sokoto state, the security situation has been alarming especially in the 8 local governments- Sabon Birni, Gada, Isa, Wuni, Goronyo, Illela, Rabah, and Gwabawa as a result of banditry. In Kaduna state, bandits have been terrorising Birnin Gwari, Chikun, Kajuru, and Igabi local governments. Bandit kingpins are holding sway in Katisna local government- Jibia, Safana, Batsari, Danmusa, Kankara, Dutsin Ma, Faskari, Kurfi, Dandume, and Sabuwa. In Kebbi state, Fakai, Sakaba, Danko-Wasagu local government areas have been affected. In all these areas affected, each bandit's leaders maintain a territory and carry



out their operation in many situations unchallenged. Villagers pay them to have access to their farms, graze their animals, and take their farm produce to local markets (Mohammed, Liman, and Babangida, 2021; UNHCR, 2021).

**Table 1.** Major Bandit Leaders in the Northwest and their Location of Operations

Armed Groups	Locations
Abubakar Abdallah (alias Dogo Gide)	Kaduna and Niger States
Yellow Jan-Bros	Birnin Gwari Forest and Giwa Areas of Kaduna State
Tsoho Manjagara	Giwa Local Government, Kaduna State.
Alhaji Bodere and Ahaji Beleri	Sabon Birni, Giwa LGA, Kaduna State
Yellow Ashana	Sabon Garin Gyadam, Kaduna State.
Ali Kawaje also called Ali Kachalla	Birnin Gwari, Kaduna State and Kagara LGA, Niger State
Alhaji Isiya, Buhari General and Gannaie	Kaduna-Abuja Highway, Kaduna State.
Alhaji Isiya, Buhari General and Gannaie	Kaduna-Abuja Highway, Kaduna State
Alhaji Ado Aleru	Yan -Kuzo in Chafe LGA as well as some parts of Kastina and Zamfara states
Lanke, Umar Bengo, Yahaya, Kabir	Dan Rumfa village in Jibya LGA
Auwalun Daudawa	Safana, Dan -Musa and Batsari LGAs, Katsina State.
Dangotte Bazamfare	Along Katsina and Zamfara borders
Alhaji Auta, Ardo Na - Shaware, Ardo Nashama and Alhaji Shingi	Birni n Magaji LGA, Zamfara State
Dankarami	Zurmi LGA, Zamfara State
Alhaji Shehu Rekep and Alhaji Halilu	Tsafe, Maru and Anka LGA s, Zamfara State
Manu D. O	Birnin Gwari and Giwa Areas, Kaduna state.
Saleh Piya –piya	Anchau, Kaduna State

Armed Groups	Locations
Bello Turji	Shinkafi/Isa & Sabon Birnin

Source: Rufai 2021

The bandits' leaders in the states have carved out areas of operation for themselves. They ransack villages, block highways, massacre civilians, and challenge the security apparatus of the state. The available data in the literature suggests that they are known by the citizens, security agencies, and state government as some of them have participated in negotiations with the authorities. Table 1 details the bandit leaders operating in some of these local governments. As it has been noted, ungoverned spaces are areas that lay beyond the coverage of the government and pose a threat to stability and security. Ungoverned spaces are often seen as fertile grounds where terrorist groups thrive and incubate. Evidence of such is manifested in the several bandit hideouts in Kwiambana, Ajjah, Birnin Kogo, Rugu, Shiroro, Borgu forests that span across Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Niger states, and some parts of the Niger Republic among others that serve as hideouts for the bandits. This argument is corroborated by the view of Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016) that most of the forest reserves are out of the reach of the security forces. The forest reserves offer a criminal hideout from the security forces.

In addition, Clunan and Harold (2010) give an inclusive argument on ungoverned spaces, she argues that the concept transcends the presence of the government in an area. It involves the presence of the informal economies, criminals, and dominance of traditional nomadic tribes, the presence of the primordial tribal, hierarchies, customs, and religious institutions. In this view, governance revolves outside the established authority of the state.

For instance, the constitution of the state placed the natural resources in the hand of the government, there are indications that the informal gold economy in the state gives rise to insecurity in the region. While some argue that the bandits are working with the artisanal who exchange the illegal gold for weapons at the borders, others argue that the wave of the banditry in the region is said to be an effect of the dominance of warlords struggling for a piece of the pie (Ogonnaya, 2020; Igwe, 2021; Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime, 2021). The report of a committee set up by the Governor of Zamfara state indicted five emirs and 33 heads of districts in the state. Also, Muslim clerics like Shaik Gumi have been supporting and negotiating with the bandits who have committed many atrocities. These revelations coupled with the findings of Rofai (2021) in Table 1 show the existence of state and non-state actors operating in the same territory.

#### **IV. Government Response to Banditry in Nigeria**

The security threat as a result of banditry started in early 2011, however, state response to the threat was rather slow and reactive. It was in 2014 that a concrete effort in curtailing the insecurity started to emerge. In an attempt to involve the police, military, and other intelligence forces, several Taskforce and operations have been deployed to the zone under different code names. In 2014, the Nigerian Police under the leadership of Suleimon Abba launched a task force to address the issue of rural banditry and other insecurity in northern Nigeria. The task force was saddled

with the responsibility of anti-cattle rustling, intelligence gathering, and related crimes operation and patrol as well as the possible prosecution of offenders (Channels Television, 2014). The task force recorded little or no success as the clamour for an effective structure for protecting lives and properties dominated the space in the build-up to the 2015 election and beyond.

In 2016, the successive Inspector General of Police set up a 27-member implementation committee in a bid to end the banditry in the country. The members were saddled with the responsibility of formulating policies and strategies for handling the menace for the police. This birthed the police-community partnership in eradicating banditry in Nigeria (Premium Times, 2016). Operation Sharan Daji, an operation that includes the Nigeria Police, Armed forces, and Department of State Service was also set up to ensure peace and security in the towns bordering Niger Republic, Sokoto, Zamfara, Birnin-Gwari Axis, and Kaduna and Abuja highway (Ailemen, 2018). Although the joint operative arrested some bandits and recovered arms and ammunition, however in some of these areas, the residents are still living at the mercy of the bandits (Ibrahim, 2021).

Other operations such as Diran Mikiya, Operation Puff Adder, Thunder Strike, Hadarin Daji, and Exercise Harbin Kunama III have also been instituted which have employed several strategies in handling the banditry in all the states (CFR, 2020). Although these operatives have killed many bandits, arrested and destroyed their hideouts, however, they have continued to attack people and dominated several villages across the region.

The non-state security actors like the vigilantes have also played roles in combating the menace of banditry in the region. There have been various groups like Militant Vigilante Group

(MVG) and Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) and other community-based groups that have been operating hand in hand with the state security actors to ensure security over time (Babangida, 2021). Apart from the counterinsurgency approach, the governments of the affected state entered a peace deal with the bandits. The deal involved disarmament, pardoning the repentant bandits, and the release of the kidnapped civilians. There was a decrease in the activities of the bandits in the last quarter of 2019 as the result of the reconciliation initiative, however, attacks have been on the increase since 2020 (Brenner, 2021). The inability of the government to curtail the activities of the group made the federal government of Nigeria declare them a terrorist group.

In 2022, the government relied largely on kinetic strategies. Operation Accord was deployed and the bandits were fiercely engaged by targeting their bases and camps. Also, the sub-national government in the affected zones within the country has committed great resources to end banditry. For instance, the government of Kaduna state has spent more than ₦16 billion in tackling banditry and other security threat within the state without lasting success (Dahiru, 2022). Also, the government of Zamfara state considered shutting down the state communication network for the second time in 2022 while fighting the menace. In addition, the Governor of the state directed the civilian, most especially the farmers to get weapons and defend themselves in the face of the prevalence of armed group activities (Sardauna, 2022). The security agencies and various stakeholders have also tried to re-examine the security approaches and strategies for handling the menace. The security agencies and National Orientation Agency (NOA) collaborated in August 2022 to discuss various non-kinetic approaches to resolve the security challenges. In addition, The

Department of State Services (DSS) and other stakeholders in the Northwest met in December 2022 to review the security situation and find a lasting solution to the multifaceted security challenges in the region (Nextier, 2023).

## V. Conclusion

We have argued that there are ungoverned spaces in Nigeria and banditry has thrived in such spaces in the last decade. Their activities have escalated and assumed a dangerous dimension in the Northwest with the resultant effect on the political, socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological aspects of the state. This is evidenced in the loss of livelihood and death that have been recorded in the affected region. While many have been kidnapped and raped, a large number of people are in Internally Displaced Person camps across the region due to unabated insecurity. To address this issue, the government should be proactive in the fight against banditry to dislodge them from the affected local communities and forests that serve as their haven. Proactive measures should be put in place to fill the vacuum of governance. This may be achieved by the government by working hand in hand with the local communities.

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