

VIGILANTISM AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF SECURITY IN RURAL AREAS OF NIGER STATE

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Abstract

The proliferation of armed banditry and the concurrent rise of vigilantism in Niger State present a profound crisis of statehood and human security. This study investigates the dynamics of vigilantism and the privatization of security in rural areas of Niger State, exploring how non-state actors negotiate legitimacy in the face of state security failures. Utilizing a mixed-methods research design the study was anchored in Routine Activity Theory and the Hobbesian social contract framework. The study analyzed data spanning 2023 to 2024. Primary and Secondary data were. The findings reveal a stark reality: in 2024 alone, Niger State recorded 943 fatalities linked to banditry and counter-operations. Consequently, community-funded vigilante groups (such as the *Yan Banga*) have become the primary security apparatus for rural dwellers. While 78% of rural respondents acknowledge vigilantes as essential for daily survival and agricultural access, the lack of formal regulatory frameworks has led to documented instances of extrajudicial enforcement and human rights abuses. The privatization of security highlights a transition from a state monopoly on violence to a hybridized security governance model. The study concludes that unless the government implements robust legal frameworks to regulate, train, and integrate these informal networks, the rural security architecture will remain highly volatile. Recommendations include decentralized policing reforms and socioeconomic interventions targeting the root causes of banditry.

Keywords: Vigilantism; Privatization of Security; Banditry; Social Contract; Niger State; Nigeria.

Introduction

The fundamental premise of the modern state, as articulated in political philosophy, relies on the social contract: citizens surrender certain natural liberties to a central authority in exchange for the protection of their lives and property. When this contract fractures, communities invariably revert to self-help mechanisms to ensure their survival. In recent years, Nigeria's Middle Belt and North-West regions have become epicenters of a profound security crisis, driven by a complex matrix of armed banditry, resource conflicts, and the weakening of formal state security apparatuses (Tarasa et al., 2025)

Niger State, the largest state by landmass in Nigeria, is currently grappling with an intense resurgence of rural banditry. With vast, ungoverned forest reserves sharing porous boundaries with neighboring states, the region has become a strategic corridor and safe haven for heavily armed criminal syndicates. In 2024 alone, crime and rural violence were responsible for an escalating number of fatalities across the country, with Niger State recording 943 violent deaths specifically tied to banditry, kidnappings, and communal clashes (Nigeria Watch, 2024).

The inability of the Nigeria Police Force which is federally controlled, understaffed, and logistically constrained to maintain a persistent presence in these rural domains has catalyzed the rapid privatization of security. This privatization does not merely refer to corporate private

military contractors, but more prominently to the grassroots mobilization of local vigilante groups, local hunters, and community defense militias such as the *Yan Banga*. While these non-state actors possess crucial local intelligence and the immediate proximity required to repel attacks, their operational methodologies exist largely outside the parameters of constitutional law (Osho, 2025).

This article examines the triggers and impacts of this security privatization. It seeks to answer critical questions regarding the legitimacy, efficacy, and long-term implications of relying on vigilantism as a substitute for state policing. By analyzing the structural drivers of this phenomenon, the study aims to inform policy frameworks capable of harmonizing community resilience with constitutional accountability.

Literature Review:

The Breakdown of the State Monopoly on Violence

From a Weberian perspective, the state is defined by its successful claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. In rural Niger State, this monopoly has been fundamentally contested. The academic discourse surrounding vigilantism in Africa frequently conceptualizes it as a direct symptom of state fragility. According to Tarai (2024), when state security forces are perceived as unresponsive, corrupt, or chronically under-resourced, a power vacuum emerges. In regions like Shiroro and Rafi Local Government Areas (LGAs), bandits have exploited this vacuum to establish parallel structures of extortion, levying "harvest taxes" on farmers and executing mass abductions. According to Mlambo (2023), underdevelopment and ethno-religious differences are caused by weak governance, corruption, and exclusionary regimes in post-colonial African governments. This allows violent non-state actors to garner support and subvert official authority. State fragility is exacerbated by political elitism and a lack of inclusive, people-centered development, underscoring the necessity of more robust institutions and advocacy to re-establish stability and legitimacy, Africa Security Review, (2025)

The Dual Nature of Vigilantism

The literature portrays vigilante groups as double-edged swords. On one hand, they act as immediate deterrents to banditry, utilizing their intimate knowledge of the local terrain to gather intelligence and protect agrarian livelihoods (Anyo, Tagher, & Ugbem-Onah, 2024). On the other hand, the unregulated nature of these groups inevitably leads to severe operational hazards. As noted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2024), extrajudicial killings and unregulated vigilantism have occasionally escalated violence, driving aggrieved individuals to join bandit factions in retaliation. The lack of standard operating procedures means that justice is often retributive, instantaneous, and entirely detached from human rights protocols.

Routine Activity Theory and Security Privatization

To understand the mechanics of these localized conflicts, this study adopts the Routine Activity Theory. This criminological framework posits that crime occurs when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian (Obete, 2021). In Niger State, economic deprivation and the lucrative nature of the ransom economy serve as motivations. The rural farming communities isolated and economically vulnerable, present suitable targets. The critical variable is the "absence of a capable guardian." Because formal law enforcement is largely absent, communities have been forced to manufacture their own "guardians" through vigilantism.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods cross-sectional research design, integrating quantitative conflict event data with qualitative fieldwork to analyze the state of security privatization. This design is highly effective for mapping complex social phenomena across varied demographics while identifying statistical predictors of security outcomes.

Study Area and Population

The research was conducted in Niger State, specifically targeting three high-risk Local Government Areas (LGAs): Shiroro, Rafi, and Munya. These areas were purposively selected due to their high concentration of banditry incidents and active vigilante presence. The target population comprised adult rural dwellers (farmers, local traders, and community leaders), active vigilante members, and local government officials.

Data Collection and Instruments

1. **Secondary Data:** Quantitative data on violence and fatalities were extracted from the Nextier Violent Conflicts Database and the Nigeria Watch 2024 annual report. This provided macro-level statistics on attack frequencies and casualties spanning May 2023 to June 2024.
2. **Primary Data:** A structured questionnaire was administered to 450 randomly selected household heads across the three LGAs. The survey measured perceptions of formal versus informal security actors, instances of victimization, and levels of trust in vigilante justice. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted with 25 vigilante commanders to understand their recruitment, funding, and operational challenges.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were utilized to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics and basic survey responses. Data was processed using SPSS software, allowing for the cross-tabulation of variables such as "Trust in Police" versus "Reliance on Vigilantes."

Results and Discussion

The Escalation of Violence and the Humanitarian Toll

The empirical data confirms that rural Niger State is undergoing a severe human security crisis. Between May 2023 and June 2024, Nextier reported a minimum of 29 major, coordinated banditry incidents in the state. The human cost has been devastating. In 2024, Niger State was the fifth most violent state in Nigeria, recording 943 fatalities driven primarily by rural banditry and subsequent counter-operations (Nigeria Watch, 2024).

The immediate impact of this violence is mass displacement and the destabilization of food security. Data from the Niger State Agency for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) indicated that by mid-2024, over 14,342 IDPs were localized in state-run camps due to the destruction of farmlands and village raids (Nextier, 2024).

Table 1: Comparative Security Metrics in Highly Affected LGAs (2023–2024)

Local Government Area	Reported Fatalities (Estimated)	Displaced Persons (Estimated)	Dominant State Actor	Non-Security	Primary Threat Typology
Shiroro	315	5,200	Yan Banga	/	Mass Abduction, Extortion
Rafi	280	4,800	Community-funded Militias		Highway Robbery, Cattle Rustling
Munya	195	3,100	Youth Patrols	Vigilante	Village Raids, Farm Taxes

Source: Synthesized from field data and Nextier (2026) conflict database.

Community Perception and the Shift to Private Security

Survey results indicated a massive paradigm shift in how rural populations seek protection. When asked who they contact first during an imminent security threat, 82.4% of respondents cited local vigilante commanders, while only 12% cited the Nigeria Police Force. This statistical reality underscores the total collapse of the formal social contract at the grassroots level.

Respondents overwhelmingly stated that the geographic isolation of their communities makes formal police intervention practically impossible. Furthermore, police units are frequently outgunned. For instance, in June 2024, a military base in Teginia (Rafi LGA) was successfully attacked by bandits, an event that deeply eroded civilian confidence in federal forces. If military bases are vulnerable, rural farmers surmise that the police cannot protect them, making the privatization of security a strict necessity rather than a choice.

The Operational Dynamics of Vigilantism

Focus Group Discussions with vigilante commanders revealed the precarious nature of their operations. Funding is entirely localized; community members contribute portions of their crop yields or small monetary donations to purchase locally fabricated firearms (e.g., pump-action shotguns) and ammunition.

Table 2: Operational Challenges Faced by Rural Vigilantes

Challenge Category	Description	Severity Impact
Logistics & Armament	Reliance on outdated, locally crafted weapons against heavily armed bandits utilizing military-grade assault rifles.	High
Legal Recognition	Operating outside the constitution, making members vulnerable to arrest by federal agencies for illegal arms possession.	High
Funding Constraints	Dependent on impoverished farming communities, leading to irregular stipends and low operational morale.	Medium
Training & Discipline	Lack of formal tactical training or human rights education, increasing the risk of collateral damage and extrajudicial actions.	Critical

Source: Synthesized from field data and Nextier (2026) conflict database.

Despite these challenges, the *Yan Banga* have proven highly adaptable. They possess asymmetric advantages over formal military forces: they speak the local dialects perfectly, recognize the faces of local informants, and can navigate the dense forest topography at night.

The Dialectics of Abuse and Legitimacy

While the vigilantes are heralded as local heroes, the data also points to severe systemic flaws. Unregulated vigilantism frequently bypasses the judicial system. Suspected bandits or informants caught by vigilantes are rarely handed over to the police; they are often subjected to immediate, extrajudicial execution. This "jungle justice" approach, while popular among traumatized communities seeking immediate retribution, perpetuates a cycle of violence. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2024) notes that indiscriminate killings by local militias frequently trigger devastating reprisal attacks from bandit syndicates, who return to burn entire villages in retaliation for the death of their foot soldiers.

Therefore, while the privatization of security provides a short-term buffer against total anarchy, it structurally undermines the rule of law and risks transforming into localized warlordism if left entirely unchecked.

Conclusions

The escalation of armed banditry in rural Niger State has conclusively demonstrated the limitations of Nigeria's centralized security architecture. As the state's monopoly on legitimate

violence has eroded in the deep rural enclaves, communities have logically resorted to the privatization of security through vigilantism. Groups like the *Yan Banga* currently serve as the definitive line of defense between rural agrarian communities and complete annihilation by criminal syndicates.

However, relying on ad-hoc, underfunded, and legally ambiguous militias is an unsustainable long-term strategy for human security. The data shows that while vigilantes are highly effective at localized defense and intelligence gathering, their lack of regulatory oversight severely compromises human rights and frequently provokes brutal reprisal attacks.

To resolve this dialectic, the state must move beyond viewing vigilantes as illegitimate competitors. The federal and state governments must institute a decentralized, hybridized security framework. This entails legally registering community vigilante groups, providing them with standardized tactical and human rights training, and integrating them as auxiliary intelligence units under the direct supervision of formal law enforcement. Furthermore, addressing the root causes of banditry namely, absolute poverty, youth unemployment, and the proliferation of illicit small arms remains the only permanent solution to restoring the social contract in Niger State.

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