

Analyzing the Trajectory and Political Economy of Insecurity in Katsina-Ala LGA, 2010 To 2023

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Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory and political economy of insecurity in Katsina-Ala, Benue State, between 2010 and 2023. Employing a qualitative research methodology, data were collected through interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The study is anchored in the Marxist Political Economy framework, which provides a lens for analyzing the underlying factors driving insecurity in the region. The findings reveal that insecurity in Katsina-Ala LGA is primarily driven by class struggle, economic deprivation, state repression, and elite exploitation. The study further shows that insecurity has significantly disrupted economic activities and led to the widespread destruction of lives and property. Based on these findings, the paper recommends economic redistribution and structural reforms as critical measures to break the cycle of insecurity in Katsina-Ala.

Keywords: Insecurity, Banditry, Class Struggle, Economic Deprivation

Introduction

Insecurity in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) is not an isolated incident but a manifestation of Nigeria's broader, escalating national security crisis. From the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012), to herdsmen attacks in the Middle Belt, kidnappings in the South, and banditry in the Northwest (Akinola, 2021), the Nigerian state continues to grapple with enforcing authority and fulfilling its constitutional duty to protect lives and property. These conflicts expose the structural weaknesses and contradictions within Nigeria's security framework, marked by institutional fragility and political ambivalence (Eji, 2016; Onapajo, 2017). Against this backdrop, the crisis in Katsina-Ala must be understood both as a local expression of systemic insecurity and a case study in state failure.

Presently, the Sankera axis aptly fits into Thomas Hobbes' description of the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The ongoing conflict in this area has nearly halted socio-economic activities, resulting in widespread devastation and preventable economic losses. The rise and trajectory of insecurity in the Sankera axis of Benue State have ignited a plethora of discourses among scholars, policymakers, and the people. This has led many to question the capacity of the traditional role of the state, which is the provision of peace and security.

Since 2010, Katsina-Ala, one of the local governments in the Sankera axis, has witnessed a steady escalation of violence that threaten the collective survival of inhabitants. A region once peaceful and promising now transformed into a hub of criminal insurgency. A community youth security network initially formed to defend against Fulani herdsmen and Jukun attacks eventually transformed into violent gangs, inflicting severe human and economic losses. One of the most notorious groups was led by the late Terwase Akwaza (also known as Ghana). According to Mercy and Abughdyer (2024), Ghana was accused of massacres, kidnappings, assassinations, robberies, cattle rustling, terrorism, etc. It was reported that he levied farmers, traders, and other well-to-do people. Ghana's activities have been correctly captured by Hagher (2019, p. 18), thus:

Ghana's group is today a fearful criminal hegemon. He has an elaborate security network that traverses the whole of Benue State. His network has continued to look out for him and provide elaborate intelligence, which he buys from corrupt government security agents and enforcers. Furthermore, he has established a quasi-fascist criminal government. At the apex of his strange contraption is Terwase Akwaza (Ghana) himself, who has all the trappings of a Head of State. He is the Commander-in-Chief, and his headquarters is at Gbishe (Katsina-Ala). His brother, Aondofa Akwaza, is in charge of revenue, while Suku Oraondo is a de facto Chief Justice and combines the role of the Head of the Pagan Religion that Akwaza is reintroducing.

In the beginning, recruitment into this group was by force. Those who refused or opposed were swiftly killed. Due to increasing poverty and the lucrateness of the gang's activities, youths today willingly indicate interest in joining. According to Hagher (2019), over 75% of the adult Shitile population were either sympathizers, sponsors, or informants. In agreement with Jibo (2021), the large ungoverned and unutilized spaces in the area make it easy for the various factions that emerged after Ghana's death to operate freely. It is nearly impossible for deployed security operatives, who have little or no knowledge of the terrain, to launch successful attacks, enabling the criminals to continue terrorizing the people. Most hospitals, schools, and other establishments have been closed for years due to bandit activities, and the state government has been unable to provide basic amenities or effectively tackle this menace despite various attempts.

One such attempt was the amnesty program introduced by former Governor Samuel Ortom. In a bid to end banditry in Benue State, Governor Ortom adopted the carrot-and-stick approach, demanding that everyone in possession of illegal weapons submit them to the state or suffer the consequences. The late Ghana and his gang of criminals were invited to surrender and accept the state government's amnesty package (Paulina and Igah, 2023). However, this peace agreement did not last long, as Ghana was implicated in the murder of the former governor's security adviser, Denen Igbana (Paulina and Igah, 2023). This prompted Ghana to recall his gang of criminals into the bush, from where they unleashed terror on the people of Sankera, especially in Katsina-Ala, where his criminal organization was headquartered.

On September 8, 2020, Ghana was ambushed and killed by the military on his way to the Benue State Government House to participate in another amnesty program organized by the state government. His death caused insecurity in the region to take on a new trajectory. His lieutenants broke into various factions and unleashed mayhem on local communities, making Katsina-Ala increasingly insecure and unsafe.

Repeated military interventions have failed to prevent banditry in the local government from evolving into a decentralized and more brutal criminal network. The major causes of this crisis, which have been overlooked, lie in youth unemployment, economic depression, the political exploitation of these armed groups, and the ever-present weak governance structure. Many impoverished youths, seeing banditry as a rewarding business, easily embrace these gangs to unleash violence. This has been further complicated by the involvement of political elites, who have historically used such armed groups or gangs to manipulate elections and control resources. In Katsina-Ala, political elites perpetuate this cycle of violence by arming these groups, especially during elections.

Suffice it to say that the current security measures, which primarily focus on the use of force to crack down on these bandits, have failed to dismantle the historical structures of economic grievances that sustain banditry in the local government. In other words, the insecurity problem in Katsina-Ala LGA is not just a security problem but an economic and political crisis. Therefore, this study seeks to objectively analyze the trajectory and political economy of insecurity in Katsina-Ala LGA, investigating its socio-economic and political causes, its effects on rural communities, and the success of previous and current measures.

Theoretical Framework

The Marxist Political Economy Approach is rooted in the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and other scholars who examined the relationship between economic structures, class struggle and political power. This approach provides essential framework for explaining the rise and correlation of banditry in Katsina-Ala LGA, as it showcases the economic exploitation, political manipulation and state failure that fuel armed violence in the region. The Katsina-Ala axis has a history of economic exploitation and marginalization, with economic structures that favor wealthy elites and political actors while rural farmers and youth wallow in poverty. As a result, absence of economic opportunities compels youths to embrace criminal activities including banditry and militancy. The emergence of Terwase Akwaza (Also known as Ghana) and his violent gang can be seen as a reaction to the existing economic deprivation and political manipulation. The state, as a servant of the bourgeoisie, introduced militarize and selective responses, favoring politically connected individuals while neglecting structural reforms. Political leaders that have enabled this conflict are protected and prepared by the state. Further, the violent economy in Katsina-Ala LGA is an example of primitive accumulation where wealth and properties are acquired through force rather than production.

From the Marxist Political Economy Approach, the rise and trajectory of insecurity or banditry in Katsina-Ala LGA, from the Ghana era to post Ghana era, is a product of the following conditions; economic inequality, state exploitation, and the criminalization of the poor. Unless the economic roots of banditry in the government are tackled, military responses will lead to the emergence of new violent gangs.

Literature Review

Before the discussion of the trajectory and political economy of insecurity in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) commences, it is important that to attempt an inquiry into the larger theoretical frameworks and scholarship on political violence, militias, and post-conflict governance. Therefore, the literature review below, intends to harmonize key debates and research findings across three related themes namely: the theorization of political violence and state fragility, the role of militias and hybrid governance, and the international discourse on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) within post-conflict communities.

Theorizing Political Violence and State Fragility

Foundational literature on political violence links insecurity to the nature and character of state formation and the weakness of institutions in postcolonial contexts which sharply aligns with Charles Tilly (1985) who argued that war or conflict leads to the creation of states and that the state's legitimacy is historically derived through its monopoly over violence. Even so, in sub-Saharan Africa, the state has remained frail, with its authority challenged, and its legitimacy tenuous (Herbst, 2000). The state, according to Migdal (2001), is a fragmented entity, where state institutions compete with local social forces in a "state-in-society" dynamics. Nigeria exemplifies this fragmentation, with concurrent spheres of coercive apparatus coexisting with formal state structures or institutions.

In the Nigerian political environment, it is a truism that institutional neglect, economic marginalization, and politicized ethnic or religious identities spark and sustains political violence (Suberu, 2001; Onapajo, 2017). For instance, Benue state and many other regions in the Middle Belt, provide replete examples where the state's coercive capacity is constantly challenged by non-state actors. Rightly, therefore, the inability of the Nigerian state to effectively enforce authority in areas such as Katsina-Ala is symptomatic of a far-reaching crisis of governance.

Militias, Gangs, and Hybrid Governance

There is always an ever-present possibility for militias to emerge as a result of the weakness of the state. They emerged as an alternative source of authority. As seen in Sankera, especially in Katsina Ala, these armed non-state actors provide security, enforce order, and regulate access to resources, effectively operating as quasi-governmental bodies. According to Paul Staniland

(2014), militant groups derive cohesion and legitimacy from traditional social linkages, including ethnic, religious, or kinship ties, which can enable their endurance even in the absence of formal ideological platforms. William Reno (2011) adds that warlord politics as a system of informal governance where patronage systems replace formal administrative structures.

In the Sankera axis of Benue State, the late Terwase Akwaza (alias Ghana) exemplified this form of hybrid governance. His criminal group was not merely a gang but a quasi-state entity with structures of revenue collection, intelligence networks, and religious-cultural legitimacy (Hagher, 2019). Similar cases can be seen in other African states, such as the Janjaweed militia in Sudan (Flint & de Waal, 2008), the Mungiki sect in Kenya (Anderson, 2002), or the Mai Mai militias in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Stearns, 2011). Primarily and common to these groups is that they emerged in response to both insecurity and state absence. Simultaneously, they employ violence as a means of political and economic accumulation.

Ghana's gang also shares similarities seen in Latin America (specifically Brazil and Mexico) where drug cartels and other criminal organizations provide social services, settle disputes, and exercise territorial control in areas abandoned or neglected by the state (Arias, 2006; Lessing, 2017). This comparative analysis attempts to show how militant groups fill the vacuum left by ineffective governance structures while simultaneously contributing to cycles of violence and corruption.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reintegration

Historically, especially in post-colonial states, attempts to address militancy and other criminal activities often involves heavy reliance on DDR strategies. These programs aim to transition armed actors from war to peace by offering incentives, training, and rehabilitation. Noteworthy is that the success of DDR initiatives depends heavily on state legitimacy, trust, and the availability of attractive incentives (Knight & Ozerdem, 2004).

In Nigeria, the most notable and successful DDR effort was the Niger Delta Amnesty Program, introduced by the Umaru Musa Yar'adua administration, which successfully disarmed many militants but has also been criticized for creating a rent-seeking culture and failing to address causal factors and other grievances (Ukeje & Ibeanu, 2016). Benue State attempted a similar approach with its amnesty program under Governor Samuel Ortom which the Nigerian Army exploited to kill the late criminal hegemon - Terwase Akwaza. It is important to note that such initiatives or programmes are susceptible to collapse when state actors fail to enforce agreements or when key criminal figures such as Ghana undermine the process by continuing to perpetuate violence. This brings to the fore findings from Sierra Leone and Liberia, where such programs failed due to political interference, corruption, and the re-mobilization of combatants (Richards, 1996; Themnér, 2011).

Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing oral, face-to-face interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and secondary sources to collect data. The interviews were semi-structured and aimed at gathering detailed insights directly from respondents. FGDs were used to supplement the interviews, providing collective perspectives and validating individual responses. Each FGD session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and comprised 6-10 participants grouped by demographic categories such as elders, community security, farmers, youth, women, and teachers.

The study focused on Katsina-Ala Local Government Area in Benue State, with data collected from seven of its twelve council wards: Yooyo, Utange, Mbayongo, Mbajir, Mbacher, Mbatyura/Mberev, and Katsina-Ala Township. One village from each ward was selected using a list of conflict-affected areas provided by the Benue State Civil Protection Guard. Participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. This method was specifically selected to target individuals with deep knowledge and firsthand experiences of the on-going insecurity, including those who were targeted or served on reconciliation committees. Responses were audio-recorded with the consent of participants, then transcribed for analysis. The recorded interviews and

Focus Group Discussions were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed. The data was analyzed manually using a thematic content analysis approach, where key themes and patterns were identified by reading and re-reading the transcripts.

Before the commencement of data collection, all participants gave informed consent after the purpose of the study was explained to them. Their participation was voluntary, and they were assured that their identities would be kept confidential. To protect participants and the researcher, no attempts were made to contact bandits directly. The study followed ethical guidelines to ensure respect, privacy, and safety for everyone involved. As stated above, the study faced limitations, particularly the inability to include bandits due to their refusal to participate and also, safety of the researcher. This exclusion, while partly necessary for safety, might be interpreted as potential bias and is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. Despite this, the perspectives of the selected respondents, who had direct experiences and have played various roles, provided substantial and reliable insights into the dynamics of banditry in the region.

The Political Economy of Insecurity in Katsina-Ala LGA (2010-2023): Post-Ghana Violence Era

From 2010 to date, Katsina-Ala has been a hotspot of persistent violence and insecurity, especially banditry, kidnappings, extortion, killings, communal conflicts and organized crime. Initially the region was relatively peaceful and only experience communal conflicts with neighboring states and Fulani herdsmen over land. The Shitile people indigenous to the Sankera axis had formed a local community security network and equipped them with light arms for the sole purpose of defending the axis. This group later metamorphosed into a criminal outfit. Over the years, the region has seen exponential increase in violence, with violent gangs, not excluding the infamous Ghana-led militia and its later splinter groups, terrorizing local communities. Respondents who participated in the FGD provided varying perspective on the driving forces behind the emergence of the community group which later turned into a terrorizing group. They stated;

The whole insecurity in Sankera can be traced to the conflict we had with neighboring states at the boundary. Sankera was a conflict free zone. However, the Fulani and Jukum people wanted to grab our land so, the elders and custodians of Shitile decided that it was pertinent for the region to have standing protectors. They bought guns which they named "properties of the Elders" and handed to "Gumor", a son of Tordonga, who elected as the leader of the group. As time passed, these attacked reduced and these youths were relieved of their role and expected to return to their respective homes. At this point, there arose leadership tussles which lead to the murder of the leader Gumor. Ghana, who allegedly killed him, took over and also murdered those who opposed him. Without much to do, the elders accepted him. Influenced by this new power and position, Ghana used the weapons at his disposal to terrorize the community and enrich himself (Focused Group Discussion, 2025).

From the above, it can be seen that the economic base in Sankera is weak, forcing many into criminal economies. The state has failed to redistribute wealth and banditry arose as reaction to economic exclusion.

During Ghana's infamous reign as fearful criminal hegemon, there was some level of control and regulation of criminality in the region. Reports and responses from respondents indicate that he imposed capital punishments on members of his gang who carried out criminal operations without his approval, especially when it resulted to the death of victims. It is important to mention that shortly after Ghana turned the community formed security outfit into a criminal organization., he received patronage from popular political actors in the region who needed his services to disrupt the electoral process, intimidate other contestants and voters for political victory and control of state resources. One of the respondents (Terfa, 38 years, Health Worker, Mbacher) in an interview stated that;

In 2011, the People's Democratic Party in our local government was broken into two factions led by Mzenda Iho and Udende. These factions were known as "2012 and 2013". These groups had thugs and aligned with these criminal outfits. They were sponsored by these political leaders and from 2011 to 2019, the people were not allowed to vote in Sankera.

Another respondent (Tersoo, 26years, student, Yooyo) stated;

In 2011, it was guns and bullets that decide electoral victory in Shitile land. Hon Agbidyer brought boys who ensured that anybody who did not support him was not allowed to vote. There were security agencies such as police, soldiers, vigilante etc however, the arsenal wielded by these boys surpassed that of the security officers so they allowed these boys to have their way.

In response, the head of the Benue State civil protection Guard in Katsina Ala LGA (Terna, 47, Mbayongo) stated;

Political leaders greatly contributed and enabled the insecurity in Sankera by empowering these boys. When Ghana took possession of these guns, politicians got themselves involved by sponsoring him to disrupt and rig elections. After his death, they continued with those who took after him. It is important to state that political leaders were not involved from the outset neither did they start it. However, even as we talk now, they are still involved. I do not wish to state their names because of my status as a member of the community joint task force.

Driven by the desire to capture political power and control public resources, political elites saw opportunities in the emerging criminal gang to manipulate the electoral process. As reported by various respondents, they empowered these boys, whom are mostly illiterates and uneducated, with money and sophisticated weapons. Without the help of the political elites, these bandits couldn't have been able to obtain or secure these weapons. In addition to the foregoing, some of the respondents in the FGD stated;

As we sit here discussing, irrespective of our level of education and exposure, we do not know where to get these weapons. However, these boys-whom are stark illiterates and have never ever been to Takum junction- possess all manner of arms and ammunitions. Where do they get it from, if not from these political elites? (Focused Group Discussion, 2025).

The political elites influenced the insecurity for political gains. The elites benefitted from it while the poor suffered. This shows the weakness of states structures. The death of Terwase Akwaza, the criminal hegemon of Sankera axis, led to the proliferation of different smaller and violent criminal groups, unleashing terror at this time, partly as a reaction to his (Ghana) killing by the Nigerian Army while he was on his way to the Benue State government house to participate in an amnesty programme organized by the former governor of Benue state, Samuel Ortom. In his lifetime, Ghana operated a military like structure criminal organization with lieutenants all in Katsina Ala and all over Sankera axis. Respondents in the FGD described the structure of his criminal organization thus;

It is true that is organization was structured like the military, with him at the top. In fact, even killings and execution followed a specific order. Ghana was able to get the entire Sankera to be loyal and fearful of him. He was the chief judge so; any case that was reported to him was resolved with no grumblings. If anyone was found guilty, he or she was killed. He was the lead commander and planted lieutenants everywhere. In Utange, it was 50 kobo; in Mbacher, it was Adamgbe; in Yooyo, it was Aondohemba

Onuvburter; from here down to Ikyurav, it was Stains. They collected taxes and exported to him on a weekly basis regarding killings, kidnapping, robbery and other criminal activities (Focused Group Discussion, 2025).

As earlier stated, the death of Ghana opened the door for the proliferation of violent groups, most of them led by his brothers.

One of the respondents (Terna, 47 years, Local Security, Mbayongo) stated;

First, it was Azonto who took over, because he knew the whereabouts of all his (Ghana) weapons. Azonto is no longer alive, so Konyo took over. They are sons of Akwaza. The two people next in line to Konyo are also Akwaza, relations of Ghana. They control the Katsina-Ala axis. In Ukum, the gang leaders are Full fire and Chem. In Shitile, Konyo, Veror and Anyogo are the leaders. Veror controls Mbatyula, while Anyogo controls Mbajir down to Ukum. Konyo controls Katsina-Ala in Yooyo, Mbacher, Utange and Mbayongo. Since the death of Ghana, these boys have unleashed constant terror on the inhabitants of Sankera, creating fear and widespread hunger.

It can be taken that a violent parallel and governance system surfaced filling the vacuum created by the state. Bandits now control the economy through force. This supports Anthonio Gransci's argument that when the state loses legitimacy, alternative power structures emerge.

The insecurity in Katsina-Ala LGA, by extension, Sankera axis, cannot be understood outside the broader context of economic deprivation and political instability. The ravaging and ever present unemployment have compelled many youths to embrace or join these criminal activities. At the same time, political elites have allegedly exploited these armed groups for electoral victory and economic control. In the beginning, ethnic and communal clashes triggered events which lead to the on-going crisis. Respondents who participated in the FGD share their understanding on how socio-economic factors have influenced the rise of insecurity in the region.

Actually, poverty and unemployment are responsible for the insecurity. Many youths joined these gangs because they had nothing to do and they desired money at the same time.

The respondents further stated that;

Hitherto, these criminals had some hand-work, at least they could farm. However, once they were drafted into the community security network and handed arms to defend the community, they saw that they could exploit the situation to enrich themselves. As it stands, even if you give them government jobs, they might reject it because they make millions of naira as criminals. Well, some of the bandits claimed that their major reason for terrorizing the community was to force the government to release the corpse of Ghana. Others said they desired leadership positions within their criminal organizations. None of their reasons carried weight and was sufficient to be used as justification for the violence and destruction. Look, at some point, the community gave them opportunity to surrender and be reintegrated but they refused. Why? Because, they do not want to lose their source of ill-gotten wealth.

Another respondent (Zaki, 50 years, Evangelist and traditional ruler, Mbajir), stated;

These boys are motivated by monetary gains. They use violence to strike fear in the hearts of our people, which makes it easy for them to demand or take ever they want. It was this desire for wealth that led them to collect money from the Fulanis and invite them to occupy our land. As I talk to you, my entire family has been driven out as well as others who oppose them. These boys gave the Fulanis our houses and lands. The fulanis have refused to leave, now that they have been asked to. This resulted into another wave of violence and destruction. The fulanis overwhelmed them in battle. People are no longer able to farm. Some parts like Utange, Mbayongo, Mbacher, Shiakpev,

Utange etc. are occupied by the Fulani. Trading has also been difficult because it is dangerous to travel on the Takum road due to kidnappings.

The impact of insecurity in the local government extend beyond loss of lives, it includes a total economic paralysis, displacement, and instability. Agriculture and trade, which serves as the backbone of their economy, have been negatively affected, compelling many people to leave their homes in search of safety. Respondents provide real-life effects of banditry on individuals, family and businesses. Participants in a Focused Group Discussion stated;

Majority of the people in Sankera are farmers and for safety of their lives, people stopped farming in the villages. They all resettled in towns and there are no lands to farm on in the town. The crops of the few who remained behind were consumed by the cows of the Fulani people, who paid money to these bandits. In towns, people have been unable to successfully trade because bandits constantly robbed and kidnap traders. Trading like farming, is not booming. (Focused Group Discussion, 2025)

A respondent (Ndotoo, 38 years, local resident, Mbacher) added;

As I am sitting here, I have a large farmland in my village which my family works on without exhausting it all but as this issue started; I, like others, have been unable to farm. In fact, most of our houses are burnt to ashes. The people who have nowhere to go and are brave enough to farm in the villages are compelled to pay huge amount of money to these bandits. On markets days, they ride motorcycles and shoot people randomly, discouraging people from trading. Many lives have been lost and properties destroyed.

Insecurity in the region has led to significant loss of material and human lives. Between 2010-2023, it has been reported that about 28,997 individuals have lost their lives as a result of banditry and related criminal activities (All Africa, 2023). Further, beyond loss of lives, the region has also witnessed substantial destruction of properties and farm produce valued at over 21-billion-naira, Vanguard (2023). These loses have caused severe paralysis to the economy in the region. Further, the insecurity has led to the displacement of thousands of people and a continuous disruption of social structures. Before delving into government and community response to insecurity in the region, it is important to discuss the role of traditional rulers prior and after the emergence of violent gangs in Shitile land. Respondents in the FGD noted that;

At the formative stages, the elders and traditional rulers gave these boys the authority to defend Shitile land. The elders and traditional rulers accepted them as their good and loyal children, especially when these boys started bringing them gifts and money. Honestly, when Ghana was alive, traditional rulers related with and loved him like a son. They gave them royal blessings, which we believe made these boys flourish in their activities. However, when the insecurity reached its peak and the government decided to act, the traditional rulers who were currently in bed with them couldn't actively support the measures of the government. The few who wanted to speak were killed. Eventually, they turned into victims of these criminals and even now that there are on-going peace talks, traditional rulers are not allowed to speak in these gatherings as it may annoy these boys who feel betrayed (Focused Group Discussion, 2025).

Between 2016-2024, the following traditional rulers were killed by bandits in shitile, Sankera. In 2016, Zaki Awuha Iortee Alev of Mbayongo was killed; in 2024, Zaki Thaddeus M. Ukande of Mbajir was killed; in 2017, Zaki E.Y Igba Asogo of Ushir Shiakpev was killed; in 2018 Zaki Shiinongo Agbatse of Mbakyamba Utange was killed; in 2020 Zaki Shom Shidi, of Mbagena Michiche was killed; in 2020, Zaki Apeishi Kwaghii of Mbatijime was killed; in 2022, Zaki

Isaac Ityev Yar Gande of Mtuhem-Gbar, Mbacher was murdered; and in 2020, Zaki Emmanuel of Mbagesa was shot and killed.

Over the years, especially in the last 10 years, the government as experimented various strategies to resolve the insecurity in the region, especially military operation and amnesty programmes. The effectiveness of these approaches remains a topic of debate. While some of the respondents believe that these interventions have been positive others argue that they have been ineffective. Before government interventions, community led peace efforts was tried with minimal successes. One of the respondents (Ugese, 57 years, Community Elder, Tordonga) stated that;

A joint task force was introduced by the former government but it was ineffective. It was mostly made up of ex bandits. Next, soldiers were introduced in the picture but they only succeeded in restoring peace in small towns. The rural areas and villages were under the control of bandits. Later, the government introduced Volunteer Guards known as "Mbashom", who understood the terrain and made commendable progress. However, these Volunteer Guards were under equipped and underfunded and could not match the might of those bandits. Even the soldiers could not equal them in terms of arsenal.

Another respondent (Bagidi, 60 years, Community Elder, Mbatyura/Mberev) stated that;

The current government of Reverend Hyacinth Alia appointed the Bishop of Katsina-Ala Diocese to commence and lead peace talks with these bandits to cease their criminal activities. He has held several discussion and meetings with them and there has been a momentary ceasefire. Furthermore, the government has upgraded the former Volunteer Guards to the Benue State Civil Protection Guard and equipped them to combat banditry in the region.

In one of the FGDs, the respondents stated that;

We hope that the government will retrieve all the weapons from these bandits, if the peace talks succeed and also, rehabilitate them. Failure to rehabilitate will defeat the whole process because in the event that they exhaust their blood money, they will return to their old ways. Secondary, if the peace talks succeed and they are allowed to retain their guns, it will disastrous. They are not trained to understand the responsibility attached to carrying a firearm. Anyways, these boys also talk about amnesty and empowerment program so, we expect the government to take advantage of that anticipation. Again, whereas they talk about the kind of amnesty deal offered to Niger-Delta militants, it is important to note that, unlike the Niger-Delta militants, they have no reason whatsoever for engaging in criminal activities. They have not being wronged or marginalized in any way. In fact, they have killed, robbed and raped their kin and kith for years. Despite all these, we are willing to forgive, accept and live with them, if they agree to turn a new leaf. We just want peace in our region.

Meanwhile, addressing insecurity in Katsina Ala LGA and by extension Sankera axis requires a multifaceted and sustainable approach. Aside military and other law enforcement operations, the government must consider long-term solutions such as economic empowerment, improved governance, community reconciliation, and more effective law enforcement approaches. Military interventions do not address the root causes of insecurity. At best, the security forces protect political elites as stated by the respondents while poor people continue to suffer.

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made;

The government and NGOs should pursue a policy of economic redistribution and rural development. For instance, investment can be made in agro-processing and mechanized farming to create jobs for the youths. The government should also provide low interest loans and grants to boost the efforts of farmers and young entrepreneurs. In addition, vocational training centers can be established to teach skills that generate immediate profit.

The government should pursue a demilitarization policy and community-based peace approach: Based on reports and respondent's views, excessive usage of military ignites bloody reprisals rather than lasting peace. It is recommended that the government augment the on-going community-based approach by training and equipping the Benue State Civil Protection Guard. In addition, religious leaders and other community figures should be empowered to continue with on-going peace dialogue. Lastly, the government should ensure that corrupt elements who have had dealings with the bandits should not be included in these initiatives.

As narrated by the respondents, the government must dismantle the political economy of violence by prosecuting political actors, security officials and business elites linked to banditry. The government should liaise with banks and other watchdog organizations to track transfer of funds for purpose of sustaining this violence. In addition, the government must address land reforms and resource control issues which lead to the formation of community security network that metamorphosed in the existing violent gangs.

Finally, the government should rehabilitate and reintegrate former bandits who were driven by economic desperation. This includes conditional amnesty to those ready to renounce violence, provision of skills training, employment and financial aid. Further psychosocial support therapy should be offered to bandits who were recruited as minors and exposed to a life of drug abuse violence.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the persistence of the menace of banditry in Sankera is not only a security issue but an economic and political challenge. The state has failed to create jobs, share wealth and hold the political elites accountable, enabling the insecurity to increase exponentially. There is need for a new policy which prioritizes economic empowerment, land reform and political accountability over military crackdowns, which only guarantee short term relief (and only in small towns). Finally, the Marxist Political Economy approach has shown that the insecurity in Sankera arose and thrives only due to economic inequality, elite manipulation and a failed state structure.

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