

THE RISE OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

Samson R. Osagie*

Abstract

Nigeria has continued to face serious security problems caused by the activities of non-state armed groups, including insurgents, bandits, ethnic militias, separatist-linked groups, armed criminal networks, and violent vigilante formations. This article examines how governance failure has contributed to their rise and spread in Nigeria. It argues that weak institutions, corruption, and other factors have created an environment in which these groups operate with impunity. Beyond committing violence, they challenge the authority of the Nigerian state by controlling movement, collecting illegal taxes, demanding ransom, attacking security agencies, and displacing citizens. These activities weaken the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and reduce public trust in government. The article argues that the rise of non-state armed groups is not only a security problem but also a direct threat to national sovereignty. It concludes that military action alone cannot solve Nigeria's insecurity. Lasting solutions require stronger governance, accountable leadership, poverty reduction, effective border control, better security coordination, justice reform, and stronger community engagement.

Keywords: Non-State Armed Groups, National Sovereignty, Internal Security, Nigeria's Security Challenges

* Samson R. Osagie, Ph.D. is a Legal Practitioner, Former Attorney General and Senior Lecturer, University of Benin.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has experienced different forms of insecurity over the years, but the situation has become more serious with the rise of non-state armed groups. According to the European Union,¹ these are armed groups that operate outside the official control of the government. They are not part of the police, military or any recognized state security agency, yet they use weapons, violence and fear to challenge government authority. In Nigeria, these groups include insurgents, bandits, ethnic militias, separatist-linked groups, armed criminal networks and some violent vigilante groups.² The Nigerian Government is expected to provide security and maintain law and order throughout the country. However, in many parts of Nigeria, it has struggled to perform this duty effectively. Insecurity has spread across different regions, and many communities now live in fear of attacks, kidnapping, displacement and destruction of property.

In the North-East, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province have attacked communities, schools, religious Centre's, markets, security formations and government institutions, resulting in deaths, displacement and a prolonged humanitarian crisis. In the North-West and parts of the North-Central, armed bandits have attacked villages, kidnapped people for ransom, rustled cattle, imposed illegal levies and prevented farmers from

¹ European Union, 'Non-State Armed Actors and their Implications for Global and Regional Security' (European Union, 2026) <<https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/home/items/930349/en>> accessed 19 June 2026.

² Adeyemi Muyima and Rotimi Agboluaje, 'Primary Duty of Government is to Guarantee Security of Citizen's Lives' *The Guardian* (23 July 2019) <<https://guardian.ng/features/primary-duty-of-government-is-to-guarantee-security-of-citizens-lives/>> accessed 18 June 2026.

accessing their farmlands. In the South-East,³ separatist-linked violence and armed criminality have disrupted public order and business activities, while in the South-South, cult-related activities, kidnappings and armed criminality have had similar effects. The growth of these armed groups cannot be separated from governance failure. Governance failure occurs when government institutions are weak, corrupt, ineffective or unable to meet the basic needs of the people. In such situations, armed groups take advantage of poverty, unemployment, weak security, injustice and poor public services to recruit members and expand their influence. Corruption has further weakened governance by diverting resources meant for security and other essential services, reducing the capacity of the state to respond effectively to insecurity.⁴ As Chukwu and Edemidiong stated, this leaves security agencies underfunded, poorly equipped and unable to protect communities effectively.⁵

The rise of non-state armed groups has serious implications for national sovereignty.⁶ When armed groups control communities, collect illegal taxes, kidnap citizens, attack security agencies and enforce their own rules, they directly challenge the authority of the Nigerian state. This paper examines how governance failure,

³ Omiunu Funmilayo I and Ezirim Gerald Ekene, 'Separatist Agitations and Human Security In south-east, Nigeria, 2021-2023' (2025) 10(1) South East Political Science Review, 71

⁴ David Oluwafemi Bodunde and Noah Opeyemi Balogun, 'Intelligence Sharing: The Challenges among the Nigerian Security Agencies and Government' (2018) 11(2) *African Journal of Stability & Development*, 30

⁵ Izunna Ogudu Chukwu and Edem Edemekong Edemidiong, 'The Effect of Mismanagement and Embezzlement of Funds in the Public Sector' (2025) 11(6) *International Journal of Social Science and Management Research*, 269

⁶ Samantha Besson, 'Sovereignty' (2011) MPIL <<https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1472?p=emailAU4PWOZrBugsM&d=/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1472&print>> accessed 19 June 2026

corruption, poverty, porous borders and poor security coordination have created conditions for the growth of non-state armed groups in Nigeria and how their activities undermine the authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty of the Nigerian state.

1.2 Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research method and relies mainly on secondary sources, including textbooks, journal articles, government reports, policy documents, newspaper publications, institutional reports and relevant online materials. It adopts an analytical approach to examine how governance failure has contributed to the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria and the implications for national sovereignty. The study also uses a thematic method of analysis, discussing issues under major themes such as governance failure, corruption, poverty, porous borders, security coordination, non-state armed groups and national sovereignty.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Concept of Governance Failure

Governance refers to the way a state manages public affairs, provides services, protects citizens and uses public resources for the common good. According to Fasenfest, good governance involves accountability, transparency, the rule of law, effective institutions, security, justice and respect for citizens' welfare.⁷ Governance failure occurs when government institutions are unable or unwilling to perform these responsibilities effectively. As Omoyeni et al. stated, it occurs where the state fails to provide security, control corruption, deliver basic services, enforce the law and respond to public needs, thereby weakening public confidence in government.⁸ In Nigeria,

⁷ D Fasenfest, 'Government, Governing, and Governance' (2010) 36(6) *Critical Sociology*, 771

⁸ Tolulope Julius Omoyeni and others, 'The Casualties of Greed: Crises,

governance failure is reflected in corruption, weak institutions, poor public service delivery, unemployment, poverty, poor policing, weak border control and slow justice delivery.⁹ In many communities, limited government presence and inadequate public services create conditions that make citizens vulnerable to armed groups and other non-state actors.

2.2 Concept of Non-State Armed Groups

Non-state armed groups are organized groups that possess weapons and use force but are not part of the official security structure of the state.¹⁰ They operate outside the lawful control of government and have no legal authority to use violence. Their activities often challenge the peace, security and authority of the state. In Nigeria, these groups include insurgents, bandits, ethnic and communal militias, separatist-linked armed groups, armed criminal networks and some violent vigilante groups.¹¹ Although they differ in their motives and methods, they all reflect the weakening of state authority. In some communities, they control movement, collect illegal levies and intimidate citizens, thereby becoming alternative Centre's of power that undermine the authority of the government.

Development Stagnation, and the Quest for Institutional Reforms in Nigeria' (2025) 3(4) *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 36

⁹ Ladi Sule Matinja and others, 'Corruption as a Barrier to Effective Governance in Key Sectors of Nigeria' (2025) 9(4) *IJRIS*, 4953

¹⁰ Brian McQuinn, 'DDR and the Internal Organization of Non-State Armed Groups' (2025) 5(1) *Stability International Journal of Security & Development*, 2

¹¹ Dele Babalola and Ebimboere Seiyefa, 'Organized crime, Violent Conflicts and the Movement towards a Dual Policing System in Nigeria' (2025) 114(4) *Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs and Policy Studies*, 417; Obasesam Okoi and MaryAnne Iwara, 'The Failure of Governance in Nigeria: An Epistocratic Challenge' (2021) *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* <<http://gjia.georgetown.edu/global-governance/the-failure-of-governance-in-nigeria-an-epistocratic-challenge/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

2.3 Concept of National Sovereignty

National sovereignty means the supreme authority of a state over its territory and population.¹² It gives the state the power to make laws, enforce laws, protect citizens and control the use of force within its borders. Sovereignty has two dimensions: internal sovereignty, which refers to the authority of the state within its territory, and external sovereignty, which refers to its independence from outside control.¹³ This article is mainly concerned with internal sovereignty. The rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria shows that internal sovereignty is under pressure.¹⁴

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Failed State Theory

Failed State Theory, postulated by Robert I. Rotberg, explains a situation where a state is unable or unwilling to perform its basic functions, including protecting citizens, maintaining law and order, controlling territory, delivering public services and enforcing legitimate authority.¹⁵ According to Rotberg, a failed state is one that can no longer perform the fundamental tasks of a modern state.¹⁶ The theory is relevant to this article because it explains how weak institutions and poor governance create conditions in which non-state

¹² Ramona Tatar and Adela Moiş, 'The Concept of Sovereignty ' (2022) 27(24) *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, 292

¹³ Political Science Institute, 'Understanding Sovereignty: Internal and External Aspects' (2025 <<https://polsci.institute/political-theory/understanding-sovereignty-internal-external-aspects/>> accessed 20 June 2026

¹⁴ Rasidi Okunola and Austin yodele A, 'Sovereignty under siege: state response, fragility and the political ecology of banditry in Sokoto, Nigeria' (2026) 1(1) *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 1-42

¹⁵ Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk, 'Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States' (2012) <<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/06/towards-a-nuanced-understanding-of-failed-states/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

¹⁶ Rotberg I Rotberg, *When states fail: Causes and consequences* (Princeton University Press, 2023)

armed groups can expand. In Nigeria, limited government presence in some rural communities, forests and border areas has enabled insurgents, bandits and other armed groups to operate more easily.¹⁷ However, Nigeria should not be regarded as a failed state, as it still has functioning institutions, a constitution, courts, elections and security agencies. The theory is therefore applied only to explain areas of governance failure and state weakness.

2.4.2 Human Security Theory

Human Security Theory, developed by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen and popularized in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, focuses on the safety and wellbeing of individuals rather than the security of the state.¹⁸ It argues that security includes protection from violence, poverty, hunger, unemployment, displacement, disease and fear.¹⁹ The theory is relevant to this article because insecurity in Nigeria is closely linked to poverty, unemployment, poor governance and lack of basic services. It explains why military action alone cannot eliminate non-state armed groups without addressing these underlying conditions. In Nigeria, economic hardship, fear, and lack of opportunities make some individuals vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, while weak state protection leaves many communities exposed to violence.²⁰ Human Security Theory therefore supports the

¹⁷ Sebastian Blesse and Andre Diegmann, 'The Place-based Effects of Police Stations on Crime: Evidence from Station Closures' (2022) 207(1) *Journal of Public Economics*

¹⁸ David Andersen-Rodgers and Kerry F. Crawford, 'Human Security: Theory and Action' <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/398751059_Human_Security_Theory_and_Action> accessed 19 June 2026.

¹⁹ Annamarie Bindenagel Šehović, 'Introduction: Origins of human security' (2018) 14(1) *Reimagining State and Human Security Beyond Borders*, 1-12

²⁰ Joseph O Nkwede and others, 'Corruption, Insurgency and Nigeria's Developmental Challenges' (2017) 10(1) *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*, 115-132

argument that addressing insecurity requires both effective security measures and development-oriented governance. Together, the Failed State Theory and Human Security Theory provide the theoretical foundation for this article. While Failed State Theory explains how weak institutions create conditions for the growth of non-state armed groups, Human Security Theory shows why addressing poverty, unemployment, and poor governance is essential to achieving lasting security.

3.0. GOVERNANCE FAILURE AND THE RISE OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS IN NIGERIA

3.1 Weak State Presence and Ungoverned Spaces

One of the major ways governance failures encourage armed groups is through weak state presence. In many rural and remote communities in Nigeria, government institutions are hardly visible. Many communities lack adequate police stations, courts, schools, health centres, roads and administrative structures, creating ungoverned or poorly governed spaces where citizens receive little state protection.²¹ This weak state presence has contributed to the spread of insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West and North-Central, and other forms of armed violence across the country. In states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Niger, bandits have attacked villages, kidnapped residents, rustled cattle, controlled forests and imposed illegal levies on local communities. In June 2026, gunmen attacked farmers in Zamfara State, killing at least 17 people while they worked on their farms.²² Similarly, in March 2024, gunmen reportedly kidnapped at

²¹ Obasesam Okoi. and MaryAnne Iwara, 'The Failure of Governance in Nigeria: An Epistocratic Challenge' (2021) Georgetown Journal of International Affairs <<http://gjia.georgetown.edu/global-governance/the-failure-of-governance-in-nigeria-an-epistocratic-challenge/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

²² Maiharaji Altine, 'Bandits kill 17 farmers, injure others in Zamfara community' (2026) <<https://punchng.com/bandits-kill-17-farmers-injure-others-in-zamfara-community/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

least 87 people from Kajuru Station village in Kaduna State, illustrating how weak rural security enables armed groups to establish fear and economic control through ransom.²³ The recent kidnapping of school children and teachers in the Ogbomoso/Oriire area of Oyo State in 2026 further shows how weak state presence creates room for armed groups to operate.²⁴ The attack was especially disturbing because school kidnapping had often been seen as more common in the North-East, North-West and North-Central parts of Nigeria. Its occurrence in Oyo State suggests that the problem is spreading beyond the usual conflict zones. It also shows that when schools, rural communities and forested areas are not properly secured, armed groups can move into new areas and attack vulnerable citizens.²⁵ The problem is worsened by poor infrastructure. Bad roads, inadequate communication networks and poor transportation delay security responses, allowing armed groups to escape before security forces arrive.²⁶ Repeated attacks weaken public confidence in government and encourage dependence on local vigilantes or negotiations with armed groups for survival. Weak state presence therefore creates conditions in which non-state armed groups expand their influence and undermine the authority of the Nigerian state.

²³ Chimezie Enyiocha, 'Again, Gunmen Abduct 87 In Kajuru Village, As CDS Arrives Kaduna' (2026) <<https://www.channelstv.com/2024/03/18/again-gunmen-abduct-87-in-kajuru-village-as-cds-arrives-kaduna/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

²⁴ Aljazeera, 'Gunmen abduct 39 students, 7 teachers in attacks on Nigeria schools' Aljazeera (19 May 2026) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/19/gunmen-abduct-39-students-7-teachers-in-attacks-on-nigeria-schools?> accessed 20 June 2026.

²⁵ Ben Ezeamalu, 'We want our children back: Nigeria's kidnapping nightmare spreads south' (2026) Reuters (2026) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/we-want-our-children-back-nigerias-kidnapping-nightmare-spreads-south-2026-06-05>> accessed 20 June 2026.

²⁶ John Sunday Ojo and others, 'Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria' (2023) 19(4) Democracy and Security, 319-346

3.2 Corruption and Mismanagement of Security Resources

Corruption is a major factor that has weakened governance and encouraged the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria. Where funds meant for security are mismanaged or diverted, security agencies lack adequate weapons, equipment, intelligence and welfare support, reducing their capacity to confront armed groups effectively. Nigeria has recorded cases where funds meant for arms procurement and the fight against Boko Haram were allegedly diverted by public officials. Transparency International reported that corruption and secrecy in Nigeria's defense sector weakened the fight against Boko Haram and, in 2024, welcomed the return of \$8.9 million siphoned from funds intended to equip the Nigerian military.²⁷ Corruption also deprives communities of essential services such as education, healthcare, roads and employment, creating conditions that armed groups exploit for recruitment and influence. Corruption further weakens the justice system by allowing perpetrators of violence to evade accountability through bribery, political influence or weak investigations. This reinforces impunity and undermines efforts to combat non-state armed groups.

3.3 Poverty, Unemployment and Social Exclusion

Poverty, unemployment and social exclusion contribute significantly to the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria. According to Ayong and Magaji, many young people, particularly in rural and neglected communities, have limited access to education, employment and other

²⁷ Transparency International, 'A good day for asset recovery: \$8.9million from arms procurement corruption to be returned to Nigeria' (*Transparency International*, 18 January 2024) <<https://ti-defence.org/nigeria-news-jersey-bank-account-seized-boko-haram-corruption/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

meaningful opportunities.²⁸ Although poverty alone does not cause violence, it increases vulnerability to recruitment when combined with poor governance, injustice and insecurity.²⁹ Armed groups exploit these conditions by offering money, food, weapons or a sense of belonging, while some also recruit through threats and coercion.³⁰ Communities that feel neglected or marginalized may become more susceptible to groups claiming to defend religious, ethnic or community interests. Poverty also leaves communities unable to resist armed groups, forcing farmers, traders and families to pay illegal levies or ransom, thereby strengthening the influence of these groups.

3.4 Porous Borders and Transnational Armed Networks

Nigeria's porous borders have contributed to the rise and spread of non-state armed groups. Sharing land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, many border areas are wide, remote and poorly monitored, making it easier for arms, fighters and criminal networks to move across borders. Insecurity in the wider Sahel region has further complicated Nigeria's security situation by increasing the circulation of illegal weapons and the movement of armed groups across West and Central Africa.³¹ Armed groups exploit porous borders for

²⁸ Alexander Wancelous Avong and Ibrahim Magaji, 'Poverty, Insecurity and its Implications on Democracy in Nigeria' (2025) 13(1) Covenant University Journal of Politics & International Affairs, 392-407

²⁹ MS Sadiq and others, 'Understanding the Root Causes and Impacts of Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria: Pathways to Sustainable Solutions' (2025) 70(3) Alex. J. Agric. Sci, 247-261

³⁰ Oliver Kaplan, 'Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection' (2013) 2(3) International Journal of Security & Development, 105-334

³¹ Eleanor Salka Minka and Rotimi Olajide Opeyeoluwa, 'Terrorism and Regional Security: The Challenges of Insurgency in the Sahel' (2022) 7(2) ABUAD Journal of the Humanities, 38-49; Accord, 'From terrorism to banditry: Mass abductions of school children in Nigeria' < <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/from-terrorism-to-banditry-mass-abductions-of-schoolchildren-in-nigeria/> > accessed 18 June 2026.

recruitment, smuggling, trade and escape from military operations, thereby weakening the state's ability to control its territory and protect its citizens. Border insecurity also encourages smuggling, arms trafficking and illegal trade, reducing state control over border communities. This demonstrates that border security is not only a military issue but also a governance issue, requiring stronger border management, regional cooperation and the development of border communities.

3.5 Poor Security Coordination and Intelligence Failure

Poor security coordination is another governance problem that has contributed to the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria. Although the country has several security agencies, including the military, police, Department of State Services, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, immigration and customs, they do not always work together effectively. In some communities, weak state protection has compelled local leaders to negotiate with armed groups. A 2026 report on Katsina State showed that while local mediation reduced violence in one community, reliance on informal arrangements left armed groups active and government commitments only partially fulfilled.³² Intelligence failure also weakens the fight against armed groups. Citizens may be unwilling to provide information when they lack confidence in security agencies or fear reprisals.³³ Poor coordination and inadequate intelligence sharing reduce the effectiveness of security operations, highlighting the need for stronger inter-agency cooperation, intelligence sharing and community trust.

³² Jeff Ukachukwu, 'Disarming Violence, Rebuilding Peace: The Katsina Experiment' (2026) <<https://leadership.ng/disarming-violence-rebuilding-peace-the-katsina-experiment/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

³³ Louis Achi, 'Insecurity: Confronting Sokoto's informants' (2026) <<https://blueprint.ng/insecurity-confronting-sokotos-informants/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

3.6 Weak Justice System and Culture of Impunity

The weakness of the justice system has also encouraged the growth of non-state armed groups in Nigeria. A strong justice system should investigate crimes, prosecute offenders and punish those found guilty. However, weak investigations, congested courts, delays in prosecution and fear among witnesses have created a culture of impunity in which armed groups operate with little fear of punishment.³⁴ Impunity weakens public confidence in the law and may encourage communities to resort to self-help or vigilante groups for protection, further undermining the authority of the state.³⁵ It also affects efforts to dismantle armed groups, as sponsors and financiers often escape accountability while only lower-level members are arrested.³⁶ Addressing impunity therefore requires effective investigation, prosecution and punishment of both perpetrators and their sponsors. In summary, the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria is closely linked to governance failure. Weak state presence, corruption, poverty, porous borders, poor security coordination and a weak justice system have created conditions that allow these groups to operate and challenge the authority of the Nigerian state.

4.0 MANIFESTATIONS OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS AND THEIR CHALLENGE TO STATE AUTHORITY

4.1 Insurgent and Terrorist Groups

Insurgent and terrorist groups are among the most serious non-state armed groups in Nigeria. Boko Haram and the Islamic State West

³⁴ Tosin Tunrayo Olonisakin and others, 'The Nigeria Criminal Justice System and Its Effectiveness in Criminal Behavior Control: A Social-Psychological Analysis' (2017) 22(2) IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 33-48

³⁵ Chinaemelum I Okafor, (2025) Vigilantism as a Tool of Community Policing: A Response to the Rising Insecurities in Nigeria' (2025) 3(1) KWARARAFIA Security Review, 142-155

³⁶ Ersel Aydinli and others, (2024) Target State Responses to External Support of Rebel Groups: Revealing the Impact of Support Level and Interstate Strategic Interaction. Conflict Management and Peace Science, 42 (5): 101177

Africa Province (ISWAP) operate mainly in the North-East, particularly in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States.³⁷ Their activities include attacks on communities, security formations, government institutions, schools and religious Centre's, as well as killings, abductions and destruction of property. These groups directly challenge the authority of the Nigerian state by attacking government institutions, controlling some local areas and, in certain communities, imposing illegal taxes and regulating economic activities.³⁸ Such actions undermine public order and create parallel structures of authority, thereby weakening the sovereignty of the Nigerian state.

4.2 Bandit Groups

Bandit groups have become a major security threat in the North-West and North-Central parts of Nigeria, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Niger and parts of Plateau and Benue States. Their activities include kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, village attacks, killings, sexual violence, destruction of farms and illegal taxation of communities.³⁹ These groups exploit weak state presence in rural areas and operate from forests and other difficult terrains. Their activities challenge state authority by restricting movement, imposing illegal levies, creating a ransom economy and forcing some communities to negotiate directly with them for protection.⁴⁰ This

³⁷ Acaps, 'Northern Nigeria Conflict' (2015)
<https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/acaps_secondary_data_review_nigeria_24_august_2015.pdf> accessed 18 June 2026.

³⁸ Emmanuel Baba Mamman, 'Public Policy Response to Violence: Case Study of Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria' (2020)
<<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10671&context=dissertations>> accessed 19 June 19, 2026.

³⁹ Johanna Kleffman and others, 'Banditry Violence in Nigeria's North West: Insights from Affected Communities' (2024) 1(1) Finding Report 36, 1-15

⁴⁰ Priya Sippy, 'Nigeria's kidnap Crisis: Inside Story of a Ransom Negotiator' BBC (21 March 2024) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68612958>> accessed 20 June 2026.

undermines public confidence in government and weakens the practical authority of the Nigerian state.

4.3 Ethnic, Communal and Regional Militias

According to Nwosu, ethnic and communal militias are armed groups formed around ethnic, community, or regional identities.⁴¹ They often emerge in response to disputes over land, political power, grazing routes, farming rights, natural resources or community protection. Although some begin as self-defence groups, they may become violent, carrying out revenge attacks, destroying property and deepening communal conflict.⁴² The rise of these militias reflects the weakness of state institutions in managing local conflicts. When communities lose confidence in the police, courts and other government agencies, they may resort to armed groups for protection, thereby weakening the rule of law and the authority of the Nigerian state

4.4 Separatist-Linked Armed Groups

Separatist-linked armed groups have contributed to insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in the South-East.⁴³ Separatist agitations are often associated with feelings of marginalization, political exclusion, historical grievances and distrust of the Nigerian state. While peaceful agitation is a legitimate form of democratic expression, violence linked to separatist movements creates serious security and governance challenges. Armed attacks on police stations, electoral

⁴¹ Chukwuemeka Nwosu, 'Politics of Ethnic Identity: Emergence and Proliferation of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria' (2020) 3(2) Sapientia Global Journal of Art, Humanities and Development Studies, 16-32

⁴² Imrana Buba and Jana Krause, 'Civilian militia formation and protection against rebel violence: Evidence from Nigeria' (2026) 126(1) Political Geography, 1-45

⁴³ Omiunu Funmilayo I and Ezirim Gerald Ekene, 'Separatist Agitations and Human Security In south-east, Nigeria, 2021-2023' (2025) 10(1) South East Political Science Review, 71-91

offices, courts, correctional facilities and local communities, as well as the enforcement of sit-at-home orders, have disrupted public life and economic activities.⁴⁴ By compelling citizens to comply with unlawful directives through fear and intimidation, these groups undermine government authority and restrict the normal functioning of society.

4.5. Armed Criminal Groups

Another major form of non-state armed violence in Nigeria is the rise of kidnapping, "one-chance" vehicle crimes and organized urban criminal networks. Unlike insurgency and banditry, these crimes demonstrate that insecurity has spread to major cities and transport routes, where criminal groups abduct, rob, extort and terrorize citizens. "One-chance" refers to a form of robbery or kidnapping in which criminals pose as commercial transport operators before robbing, abducting or extorting unsuspecting passengers. The persistence of such crimes in Abuja, despite being the nation's capital, highlights weaknesses in urban security, transport regulation and policing.⁴⁵ Similarly, incidents such as the 2023 Igueben train station kidnapping in Edo State demonstrate that transport infrastructure across the country remains vulnerable to armed criminal attacks.⁴⁶ These criminal networks undermine state authority by creating fear, restricting freedom of movement and sustaining illegal economies through

⁴⁴ Chikodiri Nwangwu, 'Neo-Biafra Separatist Agitations, State Repression and Insecurity in South-East, Nigeria' (2022) 60(1) *Society*, 40-53

⁴⁵ Solomon Odeniyi, 'Police unveil operation to tackle 'one-chance' robberies in FCT' *Punch Newspaper* (July 8 2025) <<https://punchng.com/police-unveil-operation-to-tackle-one-chance-robberies-in-fct>> accessed 20 June 2026; Mohammed Y, 'Police release documentary on arrest of 'one-chance' syndicate in Abuja' <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-central/885671-police-release-documentary-on-arrest-of-one-chance-syndicate-in-abuja.html>> accessed 20 June 2026.

⁴⁶ Chinedu Asadu, 'Gunmen abduct passengers at train station in Nigeria's south' *AP News* (January 8 2023) <<https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-government-abuja-67d19b257dd611e0b038f7c0480d71c7>> accessed 20 June 2026.

ransom, extortion and robbery. Their activities expose weaknesses in urban security governance and reinforce the broader governance and sovereignty challenges confronting the Nigerian state.

4.6 Vigilante Groups and the Expansion of Informal Security

The rise of vigilante groups in Nigeria is linked to weak state security. In many communities, vigilante groups have emerged because people believe that the police and other security agencies cannot protect them effectively.⁴⁷ While some provide local intelligence, protect communities and support security agencies, others have been involved in human rights abuses, extortion and other unlawful activities, operating outside the law.⁴⁸ The growth of informal security reflects declining public confidence in the formal security system. Although community participation is important in addressing insecurity, the expansion of unregulated armed vigilante groups weakens the state's monopoly over the use of force and requires effective regulation and oversight.

4.7 Erosion of the State's Monopoly of Legitimate Force

One of the clearest ways non-state armed groups challenge the Nigerian state is by weakening its monopoly over the legitimate use of force. In a functioning state, only recognized security agencies are authorized to use force. However, when armed groups possess weapons, control movement, punish people, settle disputes and regulate economic activities, they compete with the authority of the state and undermine law and order.⁴⁹ This also weakens public

⁴⁷ Chinaemelum I Okafor, 'Vigilantism as a Tool of Community Policing: A Response to the Rising Insecurities in Nigeria' (2025) 3(1) *KWARARAFI Security Review*, 142-155

⁴⁸ Jemma Arman, 'State Responsibility for Community Defence Groups Gone Rogue' (2020) 102(915) *International Review of the Red Cross*, 1099-1123

⁴⁹ Martin Gassebner and others, 'Armed groups: Competition and political violence' (2023) 162(1) *Journal of Development Economics*, 569-601

confidence in government. Where citizens believe that armed groups are more powerful than state security agencies, they may pay illegal levies, withhold information from security agencies or avoid reporting crimes, further weakening the authority of the Nigerian state.

4.8 Territorial Control and Parallel Authority

Another major challenge is territorial control. Some non-state armed groups exercise control over forests, villages, transport routes and border communities through fear and violence. In affected areas, people may be required to obtain permission or make payments before farming, travelling or conducting business, creating a form of parallel authority that belongs to the state.⁵⁰ This includes collecting illegal levies, regulating movement and enforcing unlawful directives. Territorial control by armed groups is a serious threat to national sovereignty. Although the state may retain legal authority over its territory, its sovereignty is weakened where it cannot exercise effective control or protect its citizens.

4.9 Illegal Taxation, Ransom Economy and Economic Control

Non-state armed groups also challenge state authority through illegal taxation, ransom and economic control. Bandits and insurgents demand money from farmers, traders, transporters and communities, while kidnapping for ransom has become a major source of income for many armed groups.⁵¹ Families and communities are often forced to

⁵⁰ Anthony Chukwuebuka Okoye and Ondo Gbekumo, 'Beyond the Bounds of Order: Ungoverned Spaces and the Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria' (2025) 8(12) IJRISS, 4707 – 4714
<<https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/beyond-the-bounds-of-order-ungoverned-spaces-and-the-challenges-of-insecurity-in-nigeria/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

⁵¹ Samuel Wycliff, 'Kidnapping for Ransom as A New Criminal Economy In Nigeria, 2014-2024' (2025)
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392708834_KIDNAPPING_FOR_RANSOM_AS_A_NEW_CRIMINAL_ECONOMY_IN_NIGERIA_2014-

pay large sums to secure the release of victims. The ransom economy enables armed groups to finance their operations, recruit members and sustain criminal networks, while placing heavy financial burdens on affected communities.⁵² In many cases, families sell land, livestock or other property to raise ransom payments. By collecting illegal levies and controlling access to farms, markets, roads and other economic activities, armed groups assume functions that belong to the state, thereby weakening its authority.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

5.1 Implications for Internal Sovereignty

Internal sovereignty refers to the authority of a state within its own territory, including the ability to control its territory, protect its population and ensure that only lawful institutions exercise power.⁵³ The activities of non-state armed groups have weakened Nigeria's internal sovereignty by challenging the state's monopoly over the use of force and undermining its authority in affected communities.⁵⁴ In many areas, armed groups attack communities, kidnap citizens, confront security agencies and create fear, making it difficult for people to farm, travel, trade or attend school safely. Some also impose rules, collect illegal levies and restrict movement, creating alternative

[2024/link/684ee845474abd185bd8eb19/download? tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZp cnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn1 9>](https://www.economicconfidential.com/kidnapping-ransom-economy/) accessed 20 June 2026.

⁵² Zekeri Idakwo Laruba, 'Kidnapping and the Making of Nigeria's Ransom' (2026) <<https://economicconfidential.com/kidnapping-ransom-economy/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

⁵³ PolSci Institute, 'Understanding sovereignty: Internal and external aspects' (2025) <<https://polsci.institute/political-theory/understanding-sovereignty-internal-external-aspects/>> accessed 20 June 2026.

⁵⁴ Heike Krieger, 'International law and governance by armed groups: Caught in the legitimacy trap?' (2018) 12(1) *Journal of Intervention and State building*, 563-583

Centre's of power that weaken the practical authority of the Nigerian state.

5.2 Threat to Territorial Integrity

Territorial integrity refers to the ability of a state to maintain control over its territory and prevent unlawful control by other groups.⁵⁵ non-state armed groups threaten Nigeria's territorial integrity by exercising control over forests, villages, roads, border areas and other communities. Although they do not formally constitute governments, their ability to move freely, establish hideouts and exercise practical control over parts of the country weakens the territorial authority of the Nigerian state.⁵⁶

5.3 Decline in State Legitimacy and Citizen Trust

State legitimacy refers to the belief that the government has the right and ability to govern. It is strengthened when the state protects citizens, provides justice, delivers public services and responds to public needs.⁵⁷ The rise of non-state armed groups has weakened public trust in the Nigerian state, particularly in communities where people have been forced to negotiate with armed groups, pay illegal levies or depend on vigilantes for protection. Declining trust reduces public cooperation with security agencies and weakens the relationship between the state and its citizens. It also affects democracy and

⁵⁵ Edmarverson A Santos, 'Principle of territorial integrity in international law' (2024) <<https://www.diplomacyandlaw.com/post/principle-of-territorial-integrity-in-international-law>> accessed 20 June 2026.

⁵⁶ Anthony Chukwuebuka Okoye and Ondo Gbekumo, 'Beyond the bounds of order: Ungoverned spaces and the challenges of insecurity in Nigeria' (2024) 8(12) IJRISS, 4707-4714

⁵⁷ Imran Arif and Nabamita Dutta, 'Legitimacy of government and governance' (2024) 20(1) Journal of Institutional Economics, 1-23.

development, as insecurity discourages participation in elections, education, economic activities and other aspects of community life.⁵⁸

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Addressing the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria requires more than military operations. The underlying causes of governance failure must also be addressed. The following recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability:** Government institutions should be strengthened, public resources properly managed, and corruption effectively punished. Greater accountability will improve public trust and reduce the conditions that enable armed groups to thrive.
- ii. **Security Sector Reform and Inter-Agency Coordination:** Security agencies should improve intelligence sharing, coordination and response capacity. The police should be strengthened through better welfare, community policing and closer cooperation with local communities.
- iii. **Poverty Reduction, Youth Empowerment and Rural Development:** Government should reduce poverty and unemployment through education, skills development, job creation, agricultural support and rural development. Improved infrastructure and public services will reduce the vulnerability of neglected communities.

⁵⁸ Lambe Emmanuel Oyewole, 'An assessment of state and crisis of legitimacy in democracy: A focus on the fourth republic' (2024) 4(1) *Malete Journal of Accounting and Finance*, 90-94

- iv. **Border Security and Regional Cooperation:** Border security should be strengthened through improved surveillance, technology, control of illegal arms movement and closer cooperation with neighboring countries. Border communities should also receive greater developmental attention.
- v. **Justice Reform and Ending Impunity:** The justice system should ensure the prompt investigation, prosecution and punishment of both members and sponsors of armed groups. Witness protection and effective investigations should also be strengthened.
- vi. **Community Engagement and Local Peacebuilding:** Government should work with traditional rulers, religious leaders, civil society organizations and local communities in conflict prevention, early warning and peacebuilding, while ensuring that state authority is not undermined.
- vii. **Regulation of Vigilante and Informal Security Groups:** Vigilante groups and other informal security outfits should operate within the law under effective regulation, training and oversight to prevent abuse and unlawful use of force.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This article has examined governance failure and the rise of non-state armed groups in Nigeria, with particular attention to the implications for national sovereignty. It has shown that the growth of insurgents, bandits, militias, separatist-linked armed groups, armed criminal networks and violent vigilante formations is closely linked to weak governance, corruption, poverty, porous borders, poor security coordination and weak justice institutions. These groups not only create insecurity but also undermine the authority of the Nigerian state

through violence, territorial control, illegal taxation, kidnapping and attacks on security agencies. The implications for national sovereignty are significant. A sovereign state must be able to protect its citizens, control its territory and enforce its laws. Where armed groups exercise practical authority over communities, the state's sovereignty is weakened. Addressing this challenge therefore requires more than military action. Stronger governance, accountable leadership, effective security coordination, poverty reduction, border management, justice reform and community engagement are essential to restoring peace, security and the authority of the Nigerian state.