

INSECURITY IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF HAUSA–FULANI INTER-GROUP RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Northwest Nigeria has, since 2011, experienced escalating banditry, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and communal violence. A prominent narrative advanced by some political and community leaders attributes this violence to historical oppression and provocation of the Fulani ethnic group by the Hausa majority. This article critically assesses the role of Hausa–Fulani intergroup relations in shaping insecurity in the region, drawing on a detailed rejoinder document that challenges the “oppression thesis.” Using qualitative analysis based on interviews, government reports, media investigations, and secondary literature, the study finds that while resource competition and governance failures exist; the claim that Hausas systematically oppressed Fulanis lacks historical and empirical grounding. Instead, banditry is driven by a complex interplay of environmental degradation, youth unemployment, breakdown of traditional conflict resolution, criminal opportunism, and weak state institutions. The article applies relative deprivation theory, frustration-aggression theory, and structural violence theory to explain how perceived grievances, real or manufactured, have been weaponized by criminal networks. The findings indicate that the Hausa–Fulani relationship is historically characterized by integration, intermarriage, and Fulani political dominance, not Hausa oppression. Policy implications include the need for accountable governance, revitalization of traditional institutions, evidence-based counter-narratives, disarmament, and modernization of vigilante groups.

Keywords: Northwest Nigeria, banditry, Hausa–Fulani relations, oppression narrative, structural violence

Introduction

Security threats represent a major challenge to global stability in the 21st century. Across the world, modern conflict has shifted significantly from interstate

wars to intra-state violence. This shift manifests as asymmetric warfare, violent extremism, and resource-driven clashes. These localized crises frequently disrupt international supply chains, trigger mass migration, and demand extensive global

humanitarian interventions. Developed nations like the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA) have been grappling with amplified social unrest and fundamentalism. This has led successive governments to come up with new approaches and strategies aimed at countering the menace, including, among others, the fusion of economic plans into counter-terrorism measures (Ebele et al., 2025). Conversely, the high rate of unemployment in USA, particularly in less industrialized cities, corresponds with high crime and social instability, which resulted in the recruitment of vulnerable citizens into radical and terrorist networks (Ebele et al., 2025).

In Africa, this global phenomenon takes on unique dimensions driven by deep-seated structural vulnerabilities. The continent grapples with a complex mix of weak state institutions, porous borders, and the severe impacts of climate change on arable land. Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, faces protracted conflicts rooted in identity politics and competition over diminishing natural resources. These vulnerabilities have transformed large areas into breeding grounds for transnational crime and localized insurgencies. The current violence in South Africa, such as xenophobic attacks, frequent protests, and other organized crimes is seriously posing serious threats to national security and social coexistence (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The North African countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, are all battling with one form of insecurity or another. The economic crisis and high rates of unemployment have been identified as the major trigger of the 2011 Arab Spring protests and the political instability as well as the social unrest that followed.

Nigeria sits at the epicenter of these regional security challenges as Africa's most populous nation. The country simultaneously confronts multiple distinct security crises across its geopolitical zones. While the Northeast battles a decade-long Islamist insurgency, the Northwest and North Central have rapidly devolved into a theater of extreme violence such as , kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, artisanal/ illegal mining, communal conflicts like the farmers and herders and ethno-religious conflict heavily perpetrated by different non-state armed groups (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2024). The Southern part of the country has not been left without these waves of crises; from the activities of separatists in the south east, militancy, cybercrimes..

According to the Amnesty (2025), these waves of insecurity have cost Nigeria a serious challenges ranging from economic, political and social problems. Many lives have been lost, people have been displaced and properties have been destroyed, thereby creating a potential humanitarian crisis across many northern states, said Amnesty International.

Amnesty (2025) investigation shows that, in the two years (2023- and 2025), at least 10,217 people have been killed in attacks by gunmen in Benue, Edo, Katsina, Kebbi, Plateau Sokoto and Zamfara state. The same work verified the killing of over 294 people in Katsina state and documented the abduction of 306 people, mostly women and girls between May 2023 and May 2025. In Zamfara state, attacks have occurred daily, with multiple attacks sometimes taking place in a single day. In the last two years, over 273 people have been killed and 467 people abducted.

Since the beginning of the security crisis, bandits have sacked 638 villages across while 725 villages are under the control of bandits, across 13 local governments of Zamfara state.

At the core of the Northwest crisis lie a complex social dynamic. The violence cannot be understood merely as random criminality. Instead, it is deeply intertwined with the historical and socio-economic realities of Hausa–Fulani inter-group relations. Historically cooperative relationships between sedentary Hausa farmers and nomadic Fulani herders have severely broken down. Decades of demographic pressure, environmental degradation, and political marginalization have weaponized these ethnic identities. This critical assessment explores how the fracturing of Hausa–Fulani relations has fueled the current wave of Northwestern insecurity.

The article provides an evidence-based assessment to counter the unsubstantiated and divisive “oppression–revenge” narrative which claims that the “present violence is a direct consequence of long-standing oppression of the Fulani people by the Hausa ethnic group” (Leadership Newspaper, 2023); which risks legitimizing banditry and inflaming communal tensions. This article systematically challenges this claim or narrative, arguing instead that banditry stems from criminal opportunism, leadership failure, and structural violence among other systemic and governance failure.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To critically assess the role of Hausa–Fulani inter-group relations in the evolution of insecurity in Northwest Nigeria and examine the extent to which the "Hausa oppression of Fulani" narrative explains the persistence of banditry and violent conflict.

Specific Objectives

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the historical evolution of Hausa–Fulani inter-group relations in Northwest Nigeria.
2. Critically evaluate the validity or otherwise of the claim that historical Hausa oppression of Fulani communities is responsible for contemporary banditry and insecurity.
3. Identify the major socio-economic, political, environmental and institutional drivers of insecurity beyond ethnic explanations.
4. Analyse how perceptions of marginalisation, structural violence and relative deprivation influence violent mobilisation among criminal groups.
5. Assess the role of vigilante organisations and community security initiatives in mitigating or escalating insecurity.
6. Recommend evidence-based policy options for addressing insecurity while promoting peaceful Hausa–Fulani coexistence.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Clarification of Key Concepts

Insecurity refers to the inability of the state to protect lives, property and territorial integrity against threats such as terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling and communal violence. It encompasses both physical insecurity and fear arising from weak governance and institutional failure. Authors such as Buzan (1991) argue that security extends beyond military protection to include political, economic, environmental and societal dimensions.

Hausa–Fulani relations describe centuries of political, cultural, religious and economic interaction between Hausa agricultural communities and Fulani pastoral populations.

The relationship has historically involved intermarriage, cultural assimilation, Islamic identity and political integration after the Sokoto Jihad of 1800. Due to centuries of intermarriage and assimilation, the categories often overlap; many identify as both (Miles, 2018). The relationships also experiencing periodic competition over land and resources which sometimes resulted to clashes but amicably resolved by the community leaders before it escalate.

Banditry in the Nigerian context refers to organised armed criminal activities involving kidnapping, cattle rustling, village raids, extortion, illegal taxation, armed robbery and attacks on communities for economic gain. Unlike insurgency, banditry lacks a coherent political ideology although political narratives are often exploited for legitimacy ((Okoli&Ogayi, 2018; Ikenga, 2020).

Oppression refers to prolonged, unjust treatment or control of one group by another. In this discourse, the claim is that Hausas systematically denied Fulanis land rights, justice, and political representation.

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into the following three thematic collections: theme one, Historical Hausa–Fulani Relations; theme two, Drivers of Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria; and theme three, Competing Narratives on Banditry;

Theme One: Historical Hausa–Fulani Relations: Scholars such as Last (2020), Miles (2018) Falola & Heaton (2008) and Sklar (1963) cited how Sokoto Jihad and adoption of Emirate system throughout by Fulani led to the political dominance of Hausaland by the Fulani rulers. Further intermarriages between the two ethnic groups led to the assimilation of Hausa to the extent that the two distinct groups are considered to be one ethnic group, especially outside the northern part of Nigeria.

Theme Two: Drivers of Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria

Rather than citing ethnicity alone as the driver of insecurity in the northwest, literature from scholars and bodies like International Crisis Group (2020), Human Rights Watch (2022), United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2024), Amnesty International (2025) and Okoli (2021) attribute to multiple interacting variables including, youth unemployment, illegal mining, proliferation of arms, governance failure, climate change, cattle rustling, resource competition, corruption and organised crime among others

Theme Three: Competing Narratives on Banditry

According to Moritz (2010), banditry originates from farmer-herder conflict, pastoral marginalization and climate change. Human Right Watch, crisis group relates banditry to organised criminal enterprise. In the same vein Moyi (2025), asserts that banditry is driven by governance failure and criminal opportunism. Recent literature on farmer/herder conflict, focus on environmental scarcity and land use (Moritz, 2010; Ojewale, 2020).

The existing studies largely explain Northwest insecurity through environmental scarcity, pastoral marginalization, climate change and governance failures. Few studies have critically examined the growing political narrative that contemporary banditry represents historical revenge against alleged Hausa oppression. This study aimed to counter this narrative using historical evidence and multiple conflict theories.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theories.

Structural Violence: refers to social structures that systematically deny individuals equal opportunities, thereby producing poverty, inequality and exclusion without direct physical force (Galtung, 1969). In the context of this study, the theory explains banditry in the Northwest stems from systemic marginalization not necessarily the purported narrative of Hausa oppression of Fulani. The result of weak and poor governance translated to unemployment,

massive corruption, and weak justice system, collapse of grazing reserves and environmental degradation among other drivers of violence in the area of this study.

Relative Deprivation: Relative deprivation refers to perceived inequality between expectations and actual living conditions. According to Gurr (1970), violence frequently emerges when groups believe they are unfairly deprived relative to others. In this context, Fulani herders may feel deprived compared to Hausa farmers receiving state support, whether objectively real or not. This perception made them frustrated to the extent of taken arms against Hausa brethrens (Moyi, 2025). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of Northwest Nigeria's insecurity beyond simplistic ethnic narratives.

Methodology of the Study

Research Design: The study employs a “qualitative, interpretivist case study design” (Yin, 2018). This design is appropriate for interrogating a contested narrative. Through interviews, observation and secondary literature, the study critically assessed the Role of Hausa–Fulani Inter-group Relations to counter the narrative that states Hausas oppressed Fulani, the main reason for the current wave of insecurity in the North West

Sources of Data: Primary sources include direct observations, review and analysis of media interviews with bandits (audio/video) by some online Hausa media, newspaper articles, and a critical review of Moyi's (2025) unpublished manuscripts and rejoinder, a personal yet historically grounded argument. Secondary sources comprise peer reviewed articles,

reports from Human Rights Watch (2021, 2022), International Crisis Group (2020), Nigeria Security Tracker (2025), and scholarly books on Northern Nigerian history.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified five key themes: historical integration and Fulani political dominance; debunking oppression claims; alternative drivers of banditry such as the elites' encroachment on grazing reserves; vigilantes; and structural violence. These themes together with interviews and observations were triangulated with secondary literature.

Findings and Discussion: The findings are organized into six thematic subsections as elaborated below:

Historical Integration and Fulani Political Dominance

Contrary to the viral narrative that claims Hausa oppressed Fulani, the majority of emirs and district heads in the north are of Fulani extraction, from Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, Zaria and Zamfara (Moyi, 2025). This structure dates from the 1804 Sokoto Jihad, which replaced indigenous Hausa rulers with Fulani emirs. For over two centuries, Fulani elites have held traditional political power over Hausa-majority populations. How can the dominant power be oppressed by the dominated?

Historical records show that under colonial and post-colonial governance, many senior positions in the military, police, and government were held by Fulanis, while the Hausa were largely excluded, yet never took up arms (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Northern Nigeria's political hierarchy has favoured Fulani emirs over Hausa

commoners from the 1804 Sokoto Jihad till today. As mentioned above, major emirates (Sokoto, Gwandu, Kano, Zaria, Jigawa, Katsina, Gusau, Gombe, Adamawa, Kwara, etc.) have remained Fulani-led. Based on this historical evidence of Fulani as dominance power in the north, the claim of oppressing Fulani by Hausa community is historically unfounded. Therefore violence perpetrated by criminal non-states armed groups cannot be justified or framed as "revenge", it is purely criminal enterprise.

The "Oppression" Narrative: Specific Claim and CounterClaim

Assessing the oppression narrative raises several unanswered questions, among which include; who oppressed the Fulani in northern Nigeria? Are the people now being attacked (both Hausas and non-Hausas alike) by the marauders, the actual culprits or they too are victims of bandits' atrocities? Are the traditional and constitutional authorities, like the police and judges who are accused of cheating Fulani nomads, purely Hausa origins, or Nigerian nationals of different origins? Who are the beneficiaries of the proceeds generated from injustices (bribery, unjust taxation, and extortion etc.) against Fulani nomads, is it the innocent Hausas or the corrupt government officials? Responding to these questions will categorically reveal that Hausas did not in any way oppress Fulani to warrant the present adversity by criminal actors of Fulani extraction.

Since the 1804 Sokoto Jihad led by Usman Danfodio, Fulani emirs have ruled the Hausaland, and most traditional leaders in Northern Nigeria remain of Fulani extraction. Therefore, the claim that Hausa

commoners systematically oppressed Fulani is historically false. The real oppressors are the traditional Fulani elites and corrupt state officials, not ordinary Hausa citizens who are themselves the victims of the same structural violence. These abuses affect all ethnic groups equally, so bandit kingpins have no justification for targeting Hausa civilians in the name of taking revenge; this is a pure heinous act but disguised as revenge.

Claims by some prominent Fulani leaders such as the former Bauchi Governor, Isa Yuguda and alike, that Hausa constant oppression forced Fulani to take up arms (Leadership Newspaper, 2023), alleging that bandits' families were killed in Hausa-Fulani conflicts is unfounded, as empirical evidence proved otherwise. When this oppression did took place, and who and who have been killed? The parents of key bandits' leaders such as BuharinDaji (late), HaliluSububu (late), Dankarami, Dansa'adiyya and Bello Turji are all alive. Dogo Gide's parents, who personally negotiated the ransom for the Yauri students he (Gide)kidnapped in 2021, are also alive. Many bandits' parents are actively involved in crime; for instance, Dansa'adiyya and his father are still alive and together wreaking havoc on the vulnerable people of Zamfara, Niger, and Sokoto. When security forces arrested Bello Turji's father, Turji retaliated by kidnapping 200 traders and seizing over 30 villages, issued a 24-hour ultimatum that forced the government to release his father unconditionally (BBC, 2022; Jamestown.org, 2022 & AuduBukarti, 2021). None of these bandits lost parents to Hausa aggression or hostility, hence contradicting any oppression's claim or narrative.

Structural Drivers of Banditry beyond Ethnicity

Rather than reducing the current crisis to ethnic antagonism, a closer examination reveals deep structural drivers rooted in historical governance failures, policy neglect, demographic pressures, and land-use transformation.

Historical Integration and Coexistence

Historically, when the Fulani first settled in Hausaland, Hausa rulers accepted them wholeheartedly, they mingled and interwoven through intermarriages. Hausas granted Fulani the existing grazing land (burtali in Hausa) and grazing routes (labi) to graze their cattle alongside Hausa-owned cattle. The Fulani were taxed through "Jangali" (cattle tax), just as Hausa farmers paid taxes on their farm produce. This system, which predated colonial rule, was later formalized by the British through the Native Revenue Proclamation of 1906 (Adebayo, 1995). This historical evidence points to a functional, integrated system, not inherent ethnic conflict, without any evidence of oppression of any tribe, particularly Fulani as some people want us to believe.

Systematic Policy Neglect of Pastoralism

Successive governments neglected pastoralists. As the former Agriculture Minister AuduOgbe admitted that, "*Nigeria failed to recognize herdsmen as farmers, supporting crop farming while ignoring herders*" (The Punch, 2017). Consequently, less than 5% of Fulani herders have benefited from land or support, compared to over 40% of settled farmers (Toungo, 2025). Development remains concentrated in urban centers,

systematically excluding remote herding communities.

Deterioration and Encroachment of Grazing Reserves and Routes

The collapse of Nigeria's pastoral infrastructure has made conflict unavoidable. According to the secretary of Miyetti Allah KautalHore, "*out of about 415 officially recognized grazing reserves, only a few remain functional due to years of encroachment and neglect. Over 60% of these reserves have been taken over or turned into farmland (Toungo, 2025)*". Without access to grazing routes or safe passage, herders are forced into areas where conflict is inevitable (Ahmad, 2025).

This decline was not caused primarily by small-scale Hausa farmers. A major factor is elite capture: some traditional rulers, many of whom are Fulani, have sold grazing lands and routes to wealthy individuals for mining and large-scale farming, profiting at the expense of their own pastoral communities. Thus, the root causes of banditry are structural: decades of policy favouring crop farming, neglect of pastoral infrastructure, loss of grazing reserves, elite appropriation of communal land, and lack of state support for nomadic livelihoods. Other drivers of the crisis are unemployment, illegal mining, climate change, weak governance, corruption and arms trafficking. Therefore, ethnicity alone neither explains the crisis nor offers sustainable solutions.

Crime is Borderless

Criminality knows no ethnic boundary: Some Hausa informants connive with Fulani bandits to kidnap prominent people within the community; in addition to

kidnapping, Fulani bandits are also accused of involvement in cattle rustling. For instance, KachallaDankarami, a bandit warlord controlling forests around Zamfara and Katsina, particularly areas around Birinin-magaji, KauraNamoda, Jibia, Batsari and Safana, runs a rustling network that moves stolen cattle across states (personal communication with A.Labaran, 17th April, 2026). Late HaliluSububu led a robbery rustlings gang inherited from his father. Others like Baba Adamu and ShehuRekep traffic arms using ransom money (personal communication with M. A. Rufa'i, 14th June 2024). Therefore, claims that Fulani oppression by Hausa justifies banditry are provocative.

An audio clip of a secret Fulani meeting in Zamfara that went viral on social media revealed the origin of banditry launched by some Fulani youth, as a revenge mechanism for alleged Hausa oppression. The audio record revealed that, the organizers of that ill-fated meeting tasked each Fulani to donate a head of cow to launch the organized crime called banditry in the name of taking revenge against the purported injustice done to Fulani by Hausas. That event marked the origin of Zamfara's banditry, which later spread to other NorthWest and North Central states, including Niger, Abuja and Nasarawa.

The Role of Vigilantes and the Ethnicisation of Conflict

Locally called '*yan-sakai*', vigilantes are citizen volunteers who step in to enforce the law when formal security agencies are seen as failing or rather overstretched (Okoli, 2024; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025). They arose as a community-based resilience measure, not

as an anti-ethnic coalition. Membership was open to all indigenous people regardless of tribe, but the Fulani stayed away, viewing the groups as hostile. Even when state-backed community protection guards were created in Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara, the Fulani still refused to join.

Despite the positive aspect of vigilantes in creating rapid response and community resilience, perhaps, due to the lack of professionalism, analysis of their activities revealed a negative nuance, particularly, human rights violations. On several occasions, the vigilantes are accused of jungle justice while conducting their job. However, the widespread mob justice and extrajudicial killings by vigilantes in Nigeria stem from weak trust in the police, as arrested criminals are often released.

The Context: Banditry Preceded Vigilante Formation

Ajala and Murphy (2025) noted that after Fulani bandits finished stealing cattle among themselves, they attacked communities, ambushed villagers, and carted away their livestock. They reportedly vowed to prevent any non-Fulani (*Kado*) from rearing cattle, forcing citizens to form vigilante groups for self-protection.

Bandit leaders deliberately ethnicize the conflict to gain cover, trapping Fulani civilians in vigilante reprisals, while Hausa civilians are attacked as “revenge.” The late bandit leader Buharin-Daji warned Fulani villagers not to join these groups (vigilantes), which is why pastoral Fulani (*Fulanin-daji*) are rarely vigilante members. They saw the groups as designed to eliminate them, though they were formed only to fight criminals and

criminality (personal communication with M. A. Rufa’i, 15th June 2024)). Breaking the cycle requires separating criminals from civilians and rebuilding intercommunity trust.

The success of vigilante operations led bandits to falsely portray the conflict as an ethnic Hausa-Fulani confrontation. Holding vigilantes responsible is unjustified; they are defenders reacting and countering to atrocities. In the absence of criminal terror, vigilante groups would not have been formed.

Vigilantes Complement Conventional Security Forces:

Vigilantes possess invaluable local knowledge of difficult terrain, which conventional security forces lack. Bandits exploit this by moving undetected across forests and state borders (e.g., from Kebbi to Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger). Consequently, hostages kidnapped in Sokoto may be rescued far away in Niger, Abuja, Nasarawa, or Kogi. Synergy between vigilantes’ local expertise and security forces’ professional skills has achieved notable successes.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Summary of Findings

The article refutes the claim that Hausa oppression of Fulani drives banditry in Northwest Nigeria, showing it is historically false. Fulani elites have long held political power, and bandit leaders’ living parents contradict revenge narratives, indicating no one was killed or oppressed to warrant any revenge. The actual drivers are environmental decay, poor infrastructure, corruption, unemployment, weak security, and the

availability of small arms, better explained by structural violence (Galtung, 1969) than ethnic vengeance.

Policy Implications

Based on the findings, the following policy implications emerge:

1. Counter the misinformation and divisive ethnic narratives of oppression through strategic evidence-based communication. Governments, civil society, and traditional leaders should systematically debunk the claim that Hausas oppressed Fulanis. Public awareness campaigns should highlight historical integration, Fulani political dominance, and the fact that these bandit leaders are criminal entrepreneurs, not freedom fighters.
2. The government should implement the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) as a development imperative, investing in grazing reserves, ranching, water points, and veterinary services. Simultaneously, support small-scale farmers and ensure fair adjudication of land disputes.
3. Revitalize community-based conflict resolution mechanisms: Local emirs, district heads, Ardos, and kachallas (Fulani community leaders) should be empowered to resolve farmer/ herder disputes before they escalate. However, this requires reforming traditional institutions to reduce corruption and elite capture. Youth employment and livelihood programmes.
4. Security sector reform and intelligence-led policing: Professionalisation of vigilante groups through training, uniforms, supervision, and integration into community policing, rather than disbanding them, to reduce extrajudicial killings while preserving local intelligence.

Encourage Fulani participation without fear of reprisal.

5. Adopt a conditional negotiation framework for bandits. Governments should negotiate only with bandit groups that commit to verified disarmament and renunciation of violence. A written framework is needed to prevent renegeing. Monetisation (ransoms or "peace allowances") must end. Former bandits who surrender weapons and cooperate with investigations should receive vocational training and amnesty for past crimes (excluding murder).

6. Intensify financial intelligence and sanctions. Following the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit's model, authorities should trace ransom payments, cattle sales, and weapons purchases. Targeted financial sanctions against bandit leaders and their collaborators, including traditional rulers and security personnel complicit in the trade, are essential.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should use surveys and interviews with bandits, herders, farmers, vigilantes, and others to understand perceptions of ethnic relations and violence drivers. Comparative state-level studies (e.g., Zamfara vs. Katsina) could identify effective governance interventions. The role of women in banditry and prevention also needs exploration.

Conclusion

Northwest Nigeria's insecurity stems from structural violence, not ethnic revenge. The claim that Hausa oppression justifies Fulani banditry is historically false and counterproductive: it legitimizes crime, fuels ethnic hatred, and masks failed

governance, environmental neglect, and a criminal economy. Sustainable peace requires rejecting such narratives and investing in justice, development, and accountable institutions.

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