State and Non-State Actors and Community Security: The Emergence of the Lakurawa Violent Group in Nigeria

Solomon Anjide, PhD; stanjide@yahoo.com[1]* & Salifu Achile Momoh[1]; saliumomoh84@yahoo.com

1   Directorate of Research, National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, Nigeria; **stanjide@yahoo.com**

Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of the Lakurawa violent group in Nigeria as a case study of the complex interplay between state and non-state actors in shaping community security. Drawing on State Fragility Theory, the study argues that governance deficits, including weak policing, porous borders, and socio-economic deprivation, created the enabling conditions for Lakurawa's rise. Using a qualitative methodology and relying on secondary data from journals, government reports, policy briefs, and media sources, the research employs thematic content analysis to trace Lakurawa's origins, evolution, and impact on community security. The findings reveal that Lakurawa initially emerged as a vigilante formation invited by local leaders to defend communities from banditry, but later transformed into an extremist group asserting parallel governance through taxation, corporal punishment, and ideological indoctrination. The study demonstrates that while state actors (police, military, local authorities) have attempted to reassert control through proscription and military operations, these efforts have been undermined by intelligence failures, delayed responses, and civilian casualties, which further eroded trust. Non-state actors, including traditional and religious leaders, played paradoxical roles at times, enhancing protection, but also enabling the group's entrenchment before eventually resisting its radical agenda. The Lakurawa case underscores the risks of hybrid security governance, where fragmented authority and mistrust between state and non-state actors create openings for violent groups. By linking local dynamics to broader Sahelian insecurity, the paper contributes to scholarly debates on fragile states and violent extremism in Africa. It concludes that militarized responses alone are insufficient. Instead, restoring community security requires rebuilding the social contract, regulating non-state actors, strengthening governance, and fostering regional cooperation.

Keywords: Community Security, State Actors, Non-State Actors, State Fragility Theory

Introduction

The West African region is currently navigating a period of profound conflict and social instability, with challenges spanning from Mali to Nigeria and across the Sahel (UNOWAS, 2024). This surge in insecurity, driven by local socio-economic and political grievances, has increased the vulnerability of populations and created opportunities for terrorist and extremist groups to expand their influence. This situation is compounded by a trend of Unconstitutional Changes in Government (UCGs), which has weakened regional security cooperation frameworks like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and hindered coordinated responses to transnational threats (UNOWAS, 2024).

Nigeria, the region's most populous nation, is at the epicentre of these challenges. Since the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009, the country has witnessed the evolution of traditional conflicts into sophisticated forms of violence, including

violent extremism, armed banditry, and secessionist movements (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2022). While Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), have terrorised the Northeast, armed banditry has devastated the Northwest. The perception that these conflicts are driven solely by religious extremism often masks underlying drivers such as economic marginalisation, corruption, and state failure. Consequently, banditry in the Northwest has increasingly adopted the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism, forming connections with notorious extremist factions to gain legitimacy and resources (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2022).

Within this volatile context, the Lakurawa group has emerged as a significant violent extremist organisation in Nigeria. However, conflicting narratives surround its origins and nature. The Nigerian Defence Headquarters identified Lakurawa as a new terrorist group that emerged in 2024, originating from Niger following the UCG there (Buba, 2024). Conversely, other accounts suggest the group began as a vigilante force of herders around 2016 in the border communities of Sokoto State (Rufa'i, 2023).

This study interrogates the dynamics between state and non-state actors in shaping community security, with particular focus on the emergence of the Lakurawa violent group. By examining the intersection between governance failures, informal security arrangements, and extremist infiltration, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the group's trajectory and its broader implications for peace and stability in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What socio-political and economic conditions contributed to the emergence of the Lakurawa group in Nigeria?

2. How have state and non-state actors interacted in responding to the Lakurawa group, and with what consequences for community security?

3. In what ways does the Lakurawa case reflect broader patterns of violent group formation and infiltration in Nigeria's conflict zones?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the origins and evolution of the Lakurawa violent group within the broader Nigerian security landscape.

2. To analyse the roles and responses of state and non-state actors in shaping the group's activities and community security.

3. To assess the implications of Lakurawa's emergence for governance, counterterrorism, and community resilience in Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This research makes three key contributions to the scholarship on security and governance in Nigeria. First, it enriches the understanding of how local vigilante formations can evolve into violent extremist groups, thereby complicating the security landscape. Secondly, it highlights the contested roles of both state and non-state actors in shaping community security, demonstrating the limitations of conventional state-centric approaches to conflict management. Finally, the study provides empirical insights into the Lakurawa phenomenon, a relatively under-researched group, thereby expanding the discourse on non-state violence beyond Boko Haram and ISWAP. By doing so, it offers policy-relevant knowledge for designing more inclusive and community-centered strategies of countering violent extremism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in State Fragility Theory, which provides a useful lens for understanding the conditions that give rise to violent non-state groups such as Lakurawa. State fragility refers to the inability or unwillingness of state institutions to deliver core functions, including the provision of security, justice, and welfare to citizens (Rotberg, 2003; Grävingholt, Ziaja & Kreibaum, 2015). In fragile contexts, governance deficits create ungoverned or poorly governed spaces where alternative actors emerge to fill the security void. These actors, ranging from vigilante groups to extremist organizations, often gain local legitimacy by providing protection or services that the state fails to guarantee.

In Nigeria, persistent challenges such as corruption, weak policing, limited presence of state institutions in rural areas, and neglect of marginalized communities illustrate the classic features of fragility (Akinola, 2020). Communities exposed to chronic insecurity frequently turn to non-state security providers, even at the risk of legitimizing violent actors. The emergence of Lakurawa exemplifies this dynamic: what reportedly began as a localized vigilante initiative among herders (Rufa'i, 2023) transformed into a violent organization, partly due to the absence of credible state authority and the state's failure to mediate conflicts. At the same time, state securitization strategies that classify Lakurawa strictly as a terrorist group (Buba, 2024) reflect the state's reliance on force, further entrenching fragility by overlooking underlying governance and socio-economic issues.

Applying State Fragility Theory to the Lakurawa case thus offers two critical insights. First, it underscores that violent groups do not emerge in a vacuum but are products of governance failures and legitimacy crises. Secondly, it highlights the

paradox of fragility: as the state loses its monopoly on violence, non-state actors step in to provide security, but in doing so may evolve into new sources of instability. The Lakurawa phenomenon therefore reflects broader patterns of hybrid security governance in fragile states, where authority is contested and violence becomes both a means of survival and a source of power.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the emergence of the Lakurawa violent group and the roles of state and non-state actors in shaping community security. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for unpacking the socio-political dynamics and contested narratives surrounding violent groups in Nigeria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal publications, government reports, policy briefs, and credible news articles. This choice is justified by both the security risks associated with fieldwork in conflict zones and the availability of diverse documentary evidence that allows for triangulation of perspectives.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved systematically reviewing and coding materials around recurrent themes such as governance failures, vigilante transformation, non-state security provision, and state responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method ensured that findings were grounded in evidence while situating the Lakurawa case within broader debates on violent extremism and community security in Nigeria.

Conceptualising State and Non-State Actors in Community Security

To understand the dynamics in Nigeria, it is crucial to clarify the key concepts of state actors, non-state actors, and community security.

State and Non-State Actors

State actors are the official representatives of sovereign states, including governments and their agencies, who possess the legal authority to make decisions, enforce laws, and use force to protect national interests (Jackson and Sørensen, 2020). In the security context, state actors include the military, police, and intelligence agencies, which are mandated to maintain order and protect national sovereignty (Smith, 2021). The effectiveness of these institutions is pivotal; empirical evidence suggests that robust state security apparatuses correlate with lower rates of violence and greater public safety (Johnson et al., 2023).

Conversely, non-state actors are entities or individuals operating independently of government who can significantly influence political and security

outcomes (Brown and Miller, 2023). This diverse category includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs), traditional and religious institutions, multinational corporations, and armed groups. In regions where state presence is weak, non-state actors often fill governance and security gaps, providing services from conflict mediation to local protection (Brown, 2020). However, their role is dual-natured; while some contribute positively to security, others may perpetuate violence or exploit vulnerabilities (Lee and Chen, 2025).

Community Security

Community security is a people-centred concept focused on the protection and well-being of a specific population, addressing threats to physical safety, economic stability, and social cohesion (Jones et al., 2024). It is a holistic approach that tackles the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty and social inequality, and empowers local populations to participate in their safety (UNDP, 2022; Roberts and Lee, 2023). The security of a community is directly shaped by complex interactions, be they collaborative, competitive, or conflictual between state and non-state actors (Ahmed and Thompson, 2023). Effective community security, therefore, often depends on the synergy between state actors, who provide legal authority and resources, and non-state actors, who contribute local knowledge and community trust (Taylor, 2024).

State and Non-State Actors in Community Security

State Actors:

While extensive research has focused on Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria, the conditions in the Northwest, particularly Sokoto State, provide a potent example of how state vulnerabilities foster extremism. Sokoto State's geography bordering the crime-ridden Gundumi Forest Reserve, bandit-afflicted Zamfara State, and the Republic of Niger makes it a strategic corridor for illicit activities (Rufa'i, 2023). Its history as the seat of the Sokoto Caliphate and its largely agrarian economy have made it a hub for diverse populations, but it also grapples with entrenched poverty, high unemployment, and low educational outcomes. Localities like Gudu and Tangaza, which have become Lakurawa strongholds, suffer from a dearth of public schools and high illiteracy rates, creating a pool of disaffected youth susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups (Rufa'i, 2023). This combination of socio-economic deprivation, porous borders, and weak state presence has created a fertile ground for groups like Lakurawa to thrive.

The Nigerian state has played an ambivalent role in the security dynamics of Northwestern Nigeria. On the one hand, federal authorities have deployed military operations such as Fansan Yamma and Farautar Mujiya in an attempt to contain Lakurawa's activities following attacks in Kebbi and Sokoto States (Rufa'i, 2023). The

Federal High Court also formally proscribed Lakurawa as a terrorist organization in 2025, signalling a recognition of its threat to national security (The Nation, 2025). Similarly, the Sokoto State Government has combined support for security agencies with non-kinetic approaches, including deradicalization initiatives led by Islamic clerics (Rufa'i, 2023). However, state responses have largely been delayed, reactive, and heavily militarized. Intelligence failures have undermined military operations, sometimes leading to civilian casualties, such as the December 2024 airstrike in Sokoto that mistakenly killed at least 10 civilians (AP News, 2025). Local policing remains under-resourced, while poor engagement with border communities has perpetuated mistrust. Thus, while the state projects authority through military campaigns, its limited ability to provide consistent protection, justice, and development continues to fuel insecurity and weaken its legitimacy (Anjide & Okoli, 2017; Dahiru, 2024).

Non-State Actors:

Non-state actors have been both protectors and sources of insecurity. Initially, traditional leaders and community representatives in Sokoto invited the Lakurawa, then known as militant herders from Mali, to defend their communities against rampant Zamfara bandits (Rufa'i, 2023). This decision reflected the acute failure of the state to guarantee security in border areas such as Gudu and Tangaza, which were particularly vulnerable due to poverty, illiteracy, and porous borders. For a time, Lakurawa filled this security vacuum, driving out rival bandits and gaining legitimacy.

Once entrenched, the group imposed an extremist ideology, enforcing its interpretation of Sharia law, collecting taxes, punishing perceived moral infractions, and asserting itself as a parallel authority (Dahiru, 2024). Local youth were attracted not only by ideological narratives but also by financial incentives and the promise of belonging. Traditional and religious leaders, some of whom were initially complicit in mobilizing resources for Lakurawa, later shifted to opposing the group through sensitization campaigns, often with government support (Rufa'i, 2023). This evolution highlights the paradox of non-state actors: they may serve as immediate security providers but can also morph into destabilizing forces.

Interactions Between State and Non-State Actors

The interplay between state and non-state actors has significantly shaped the Lakurawa crisis. The initial collaboration between traditional leaders and an armed vigilante force demonstrated how communities substitute absent state security with informal arrangements. However, once Lakurawa transitioned into an extremist group, the state and local actors found themselves at odds with a force they had helped empower. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern of hybrid security governance in fragile contexts

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(Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011), where authority is fragmented and shared across multiple actors, often producing insecurity rather than stability.

Furthermore, the state's failure to establish credible partnerships with border communities has widened the trust deficit, limiting intelligence gathering and cooperation. Where collaboration does occur, such as religious leaders assisting deradicalization campaigns, it has lacked sufficient institutional support and resources to be effective. The result is a security landscape where neither the state nor local actors hold uncontested legitimacy, creating fertile ground for groups like Lakurawa to thrive.

Implications for Community Security

The Lakurawa case illustrates the dangerous consequences of blurred boundaries between protection and violence. Communities that initially welcomed non-state actors for survival became subjected to extremist coercion. The state, constrained by weak governance and over-reliance on military responses, has struggled to regain legitimacy. These dynamics show that community security in Northwestern Nigeria is not simply a matter of state absence but of contested authority, where interactions between state and non-state actors can inadvertently reinforce fragility and enable violent group emergence.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study highlight how the emergence of the Lakurawa group is deeply rooted in Nigeria's broader governance failures, illustrating key tenets of State Fragility Theory. According to Rotberg (2003), fragile states are defined by their inability to provide core functions such as security, justice, and welfare to their citizens. This incapacity not only erodes state legitimacy but also creates space for alternative actors to assume roles traditionally associated with state authority. The Lakurawa case exemplifies this dynamic: weak state presence in Sokoto's border regions left communities vulnerable to rampant banditry, forcing them to rely on non-state solutions for survival.

The initial decision by community leaders to invite the Lakurawa as a protective force against Zamfara bandits demonstrates the substitution effect of fragility, where non-state actors' step in to fill critical gaps in security provision (Grävingholt, Ziaja & Kreibaum, 2015). Yet, as State Fragility Theory suggests, such actors can become new sources of instability once empowered, particularly in contexts where the state lacks mechanisms of oversight or integration. The Lakurawa's transition from community defenders to extremist rulers imposing parallel governance structures reflects this paradox. What began as a stopgap for protection evolved into a challenge to state sovereignty, underlining how fragile contexts incubate violent transformations.

These dynamics also contribute to broader debates on hybrid security governance. Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) argue that in fragile states, authority is fragmented among state and non-state actors, creating overlapping, and sometimes competing, systems of order. The interactions between the Nigerian state, traditional leaders, and the Lakurawa group underscore this hybridity. Traditional leaders initially enabled the group's rise but later resisted its radicalization; the state, meanwhile, relied on securitized responses that further strained relations with communities. The outcome was not an enhancement of security but the entrenchment of contested authority, mirroring patterns observed across the Sahel where extremist groups exploit governance vacuums (UNOWAS, 2024).

Furthermore, the case advances scholarly debates by illustrating the local-to-transnational trajectory of violent groups. While Boko Haram and ISWAP emerged with overt ideological motivations, Lakurawa's origins in community self-defense highlight how local grievances and security vacuums can escalate into extremist violence. This progression aligns with State Fragility Theory's emphasis on the ways in which socio-economic deprivation, corruption, and weak border governance converge to generate fertile ground for violent actors. By situating Lakurawa within this framework, the study underscores that state fragility not only explains the persistence of violence but also the metamorphosis of informal security providers into violent challengers of state authority.

In advancing this theoretical perspective, the study makes two contributions to scholarship. First, it demonstrates that violent groups in Nigeria cannot be understood solely through ideological or religious frameworks; rather, they must be contextualized within the governance deficits that enable their emergence. Second, it highlights how the Lakurawa case expands the typology of violent group formation, showing that vigilante origins can intersect with extremist infiltration in fragile border regions. This broadens the analytical utility of State Fragility Theory by demonstrating its applicability not just to state collapse, but to the micro-level processes through which fragility manifests in community security dynamics.

Summary of Key Findings

This study has examined the emergence of the Lakurawa violent group in Nigeria, situating it within the broader dynamics of state fragility and community security. Several key findings emerge:

1. Contested Origins and Evolution: Lakurawa's roots lie in both local vigilante self-defense initiatives and cross-border extremist infiltration. This dual origin reflects the blurred boundaries between protection and violence in fragile contexts.

2. State Responses and Limitations: The Nigerian state has primarily relied on securitized, military-centered responses, including proscription of Lakurawa as a terrorist organization and targeted operations. However, intelligence failures, civilian casualties, and delayed interventions have undermined effectiveness, further eroding public trust.

3. Non-State Actors 'Dual Role: Traditional leaders and community groups initially facilitated Lakurawa's entry as a protective force but later resisted its extremist agenda. This highlights the paradox of non-state actors, who can simultaneously enhance and destabilize community security.

4. Hybrid Security Dynamics: Interactions between state and non-state actors produced a fragmented security landscape, where neither side held uncontested legitimacy. This hybridity created openings for Lakurawa to embed itself as a parallel authority.

5. Implications for Governance and Stability: The Lakurawa case demonstrates how governance deficits, socio-economic deprivation, and border insecurity converge to foster violent group emergence. It also shows that local grievances, when unaddressed, can escalate into extremist violence with regional implications.

The Lakurawa phenomenon underscores the risks of governance vacuums in fragile states, where attempts to substitute absent state security with informal arrangements can inadvertently empower violent actors. It also reveals the urgent need for holistic security strategies that combine state authority with credible community partnerships.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The emergence of the Lakurawa violent group in Nigeria provides a stark illustration of how governance deficits, socio-economic marginalization, and porous borders create fertile ground for violent non-state actors. Initially invited by community leaders to provide protection against rampant banditry, Lakurawa quickly transformed from a localized security solution into an extremist movement imposing parallel authority. This trajectory highlights the paradox of security provision in fragile states: when the state fails to secure its citizens, communities resort to informal actors, often at the cost of empowering new threats. Anchored in State Fragility Theory, this study demonstrates that violent groups like Lakurawa are not anomalies but predictable outcomes of weak state capacity and eroded legitimacy. The findings also contribute to broader debates on hybrid security governance, where authority is contested and fragmented among state and non-state actors. By situating Lakurawa within these theoretical debates, the study advances understanding of how violent groups emerge, evolve, and embed themselves in local communities, extending scholarly focus beyond more widely studied cases such as

Boko Haram and ISWAP. Addressing the Lakurawa threat requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates security operations with governance and development initiatives. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen Intelligence and Multi-Agency Coordination: The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) should establish a dedicated task force involving the military, police, intelligence services, and border security agencies to map Lakurawa's networks, financing, and regional linkages.

2. Rebuild State/Community Trust: Security agencies must engage border communities not merely as intelligence sources but as partners. Community policing initiatives, joint patrols, and improved accountability mechanisms are critical for restoring public trust in state protection.

3. Support Credible Non-State Actors: Traditional and religious leaders who resist extremist ideologies should be formally integrated into prevention strategies through capacity-building, financial support, and inclusion in counter-radicalization programs.

4. Address Socio-Economic Drivers of Recruitment: Federal and state governments should prioritize investments in education, job creation, and infrastructure in vulnerable areas like Gudu and Tangaza. Reducing poverty and youth unemployment is essential to limiting the recruitment pool for groups like Lakurawa.

5. Regional and Cross-Border Cooperation: Given Lakurawa's alleged links to instability in Niger and wider Sahel networks, Nigeria should strengthen regional security frameworks through ECOWAS and bilateral agreements to curb cross-border arms flows and extremist mobility.

Defeating Lakurawa and preventing similar groups from emerging requires moving beyond a purely kinetic strategy. Sustainable security must rest on restoring the social contract between the Nigerian state and its citizens by addressing both immediate security needs and long-term governance deficits. Only by integrating military, socio-economic, and community-based approaches can Nigeria effectively confront the complex challenge of violent non-state actors.

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