

THE PROLIFERATION OF ARMED VIGILANTE GROUPS IN NIGERIA: TACIT OR OFFICIAL ENDORSEMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines the proliferation of armed vigilante groups in Nigeria, especially with its tacit or official endorsements by the Federal and State Governments and the general public. In recent times, the activities of armed vigilante groups has sparked a lot of scholarly debates among authors, critics and analysts who tend to question the necessity for the normal security forces to abdicate their duties to alternative organizations in the country. The study used secondary sources of data collection methods, while the general systems theory provided the framework. The result of findings revealed that four different categories of vigilante groups exist in Nigeria, namely the neighborhood or community watch, ethnic vigilante groups, religious vigilante groups and state-sponsored vigilante groups. Despite the obvious shortcomings in their activities, the proliferation of these armed groups has the support of private individuals and public institutions in the country; thereby filling security gaps provided by the inefficient and ineffective policing of regular security forces. Therefore, it was suggested that the capability of the Federal Government to offer security and administer justice to its citizens needs to be improved irrespective of tribe or religious affiliations, provide better security and counter impunity, pursue police reform and bolster judicial capacity to deliver justice without fear or favor, delegate some policing authority to state and local governments, and create legislation to better control vigilante groups and the dangers involved in their operations. Otherwise, armed vigilante groups will continue to proliferate with increased capacity to upset national security systems.

Keywords: *Armed Vigilante Groups, Proliferation, Nigeria, Tacit or Official Endorsement, National Security.*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, armed vigilante groups have proliferated in Nigeria, dedicating their efforts to fighting crime, protecting and defending lives and property. Many small volunteer groups in rural and urban regions, some of which are well-organized and have large structures established by state governments, make up the majority of armed vigilante groups. Some others are tasked with defending certain ethnic or religious group's interests. In reality, the Federal Government and its security agencies are perceived as becoming less and less able to reduce insecurity throughout the country, which is a key influencing factor in the emergence of these new security outfits. In many ways, there is a sense of siege felt by many ethnic groups, communities, neighborhoods and individuals, which heighten the need and use of self-help for self-defense. Due to the Nigeria Police Force's (NPF) and other security services' inability to provide appropriate security, vigilante groups are filling security gaps in a number of parts in the nation. However, due to inadequate control and training, their members pose the potential of committing human rights violations and being improperly employed by political elites and other authorities. The chance that in some situations, their actions can exacerbate tensions in local communities, ethnic groupings, and religious organizations raises the potential of conflict.

Almost every community, local government, and state currently has a standing vigilante group providing security where the police left off. There are also practically any streets or neighborhoods in the majority of the country's urban areas without an armed vigilante group (Onuoha and Kwaj, 2018). The recent rise in vigilante groups in Nigeria, especially from the middle of the 2010s, can be traced to various causes. Among which are the Boko Haram insurgency in the country's northeast, a protracted ethno-religious conflict in the country's north central region, the phenomenon of herder-farmer conflicts in many regions, an increase in violent crime in cities and along highways, and inter-communal conflicts in many communities all over the country. In addition, many communities and neighborhoods are under seize by arms wielding young persons who are members of cult groups that occasionally engaged in inter and intra-cult rivalry and conflicts, and crime.

The level of violence that goes along with these events has basically overwhelmed the NPF. It is noteworthy that the police are underfunded, understaffed, and poorly equipped. Furthermore, corruption in the police has a negative impact on its optimal performance. Since the police are under the supervision of the Federal Government and frequently wait for orders from their federal headquarters, they appear to be getting worse at responding quickly to calls for help in

many locations. As a result, many Nigerians no longer believe that the Federal Government will safeguard all citizens in every state or geo-political zone of the nation. Armed vigilante groups easily fill the security gap as people, ethnic and religious groups are compelled to create novel strategies for self-defense as a result of these challenges.

Many viewpoints exist regarding the renewed emergence of vigilante groups in the country. These groups provide crucial services, earning the favor of residents and government representatives, while others view in the contrary (Chikwendu et al, 2016; Onuoha, and Kwaj, 2018; Osakwe, and Audu, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2022). Notably, the 1999 constitution holds law enforcement officials primarily responsible for serious violations that have exacerbated a culture of impunity in areas hard hit by violence, as well as some federal officials, who assert that some groups' demands violate the constitution (International Crisis Group, 2022). Therefore, vigilante actions have sparked debates.

The main focus of this paper, therefore, is to explore the growth of armed vigilante groups in Nigeria, especially with tacit or official endorsement by the general public and government institutions. The paper is divided into eight parts. The next is conceptual discourse, which is followed by the literature review. The fourth is theoretical framework, while the fifth is methods of study. The sixth is the types of vigilante groups in Nigeria, while the seventh part is tacit or official endorsement. The concluding remarks end the paper.

Conceptual Discourse

Just like any other social science concept, the term vigilante or vigilantism has variegated meanings and scholarly views on it attests to this fact. Similarly, (Abrahams, 1998) said vigilantism is difficult to categorically and authoritatively define. This is because in political science literature, vigilantism refers to a wide variety of extremely distinct actions that in some ways related, but not exclusively, from uncivil disobedience (Kirkpatrick, 2008) to terrorism (de la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca, 2011) to established violence (Rosenbaum and Sederburg, 1979). However, vigilantism can be defined as “the taking of laws into one’s own hands” (Rosenbaum and Sederburg, 1979: p, 542). Circumstances and cultural distinctions have little bearing on this thrifty notion of vigilantism. Yet, because it is not obvious what it means to take matters into one's own hands, this is not a suitable basis for social science research on vigilantism (Bateson, 2020).

This led Bateson (2020) to view vigilantism as "the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses." Notably, there are three basic parts to the definition: One is that vigilantism is the extralegal, which means that it is done outside of the law. Note that this may not necessarily be in violation of the law. Two is that of prevention, investigation, or punishment. This implies that it requires concrete acts must be taken, not just certain attitudes or beliefs. And three is that vigilantism is reaction to a perceived crime or violation of an authoritative norm.

On their part, Cohen, Junk, and Weintraub (2023: p. 23) used the term "collective vigilantism" to define the phenomenon as "group violence to punish perceived offenses to a community", that is both global and common in the contemporary world. In light of this, it is necessary to comprehend how states are formed, how contestations occur, how crime, law, and justice work, how inequality exists, and how racial and ethnic conflicts develop in the modern world.

Vigilantism is not just a response to criminal activity. It involves the use of power. As pointed out in Dahl (1957: p. 203-203), power is such that "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something he would otherwise not do." This kind of overt compulsion is part of vigilantism. When a vigilante group member warns you that you shouldn't enter or cross the street to get to the house you're staying at since your face is unfamiliar and doing so could get you lynched or subject you to severe punishment, as is frequently the case in most urban neighborhoods in Nigeria. As a result, you can be forced to leave or request for a neighbor to identify you before you're allowed to enter the area. Also, vigilantism is a power play because it has shaped public discourse (*Bateson, 2020*). We, therefore, suggest that vigilantism is a term used to describe an organized group of individuals that conduct security surveillance on their area and beyond by identifying and punishing criminals.

Literature Review

Armed vigilante groups are structures of policing found in ancient and modern societies. Before the advent of colonial policing, African civilizations had a variety of organizations for defense, protection, and security (Pratten, 2008). This means that vigilante groups predated the Nigerian state. With European incursion in African politics and the emergence of colonialism came with distortion of the traditional institutions and ideals that had, since the beginning of time, maintained peaceful co-existence, the preservation of lives and property, and the maintenance

of law and order. In order to preserve national security, the British colonial government in Nigeria established the official police.

It is hotly contested whether or not the primary purposes of police in colonial times were to foster social peace, harmony and ensure the safety of people and their property. Numerous analysts and scholars think that policing practices throughout the colonial era were anti-people. Instead, the colonial rulers' interests were intended to be served and protected (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000; Rotimi, 2001; Okafor, 2006). The principle of policing during the colonial period was more or less like strangers regulating strangers (Rotimi, 2001).

Furthermore, the method of policing used in the post-colonial era was a holdover from that age. This was clear from the way the post-colonial police enforced the law and carried out their daily tasks. According to Rotimi (2001), as whoever pays the piper dictates the tune, the post-colonial police in Nigeria also followed the interests of its employers who occupied positions of power, and nothing better could be expected from them. The activities of the police have been hampered by inefficiency and ineffectiveness as a result, and it appears that the public has lost faith in the police.

Alemika and Chukwuma (2005) maintained that the public has low regard for the police and is afraid of their brutality and extortion. This, according to the authors, is a result of the police's incompetence and inability to prevent and control crime, identify and apprehend criminals, maintain a strong rule of law, respect for human rights, and lack of accountability, rudeness, and systemic corruption. Such perception of the police greatly contrasts to the local policing techniques adopted by Africa societies prior to the advent of colonialism and modern systems of governance. The public's declining trust in the police and the government as a result of a constant rise in violent crime in society also led to the revival and spread of neighborhood watch and other informal policing practices, sometimes known as vigilantism or neighborhood watch (Abrahansen & Williams, 2005).

In their study of *Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) in North East Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities for Security Sector Governance*, Onuoha and Kwaj (2018) concentrated on Adamawa, Bornu, and Yobe States, and noted that these groups operate globally under various ideologies that jeopardize international peace and security. In Nigeria, the NSAGs have likewise grown to be a significant security problem. This is because they oppose political authority and violate human rights through their ideology and activities.

As the authors noted, NSAGs have been around for a while, and their recent proliferation in Nigeria is not entirely a recent development. However, the rise of the violent insurgency group Boko Haram, along with its offshoots, armed herdsmen, and other security concerns, has elevated the vigilante phenomenon to the fore of national security discourses because they are accountable for terrible atrocities both inside and outside of Nigeria. Conversely, organizations such as the civilian joint task force (CJTF), State Hunters Association, and Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) assert that their own operations serve the greater good and protect communities from militancy and roving herdsmen (Onuoha and Kwaj, 2018).

Vigilantes regrettably don't always serve a good purpose. Some have questioned established authority and state security actors, putting everyone in peril, regardless of creed or nationality, and this has caused substantial unrest. No matter what goals the various NSAGs claim to have, they are altering Nigeria's security environment. As a result, the security architecture of communities that have repeatedly been the target of herders and guerrilla attacks is being reconfigured. They are significantly modifying the environment of peace and stability in order to attain their objectives.

Chigozie and Ikechukwu (2019) explore the administration of vigilantes and the proliferation of firearms in Dunukofia Local Government Area in Anambra State. The authors revealed that the emergence of vigilante groups led to the proliferation of weaponry, which in turn boosted the number of firearm related conflicts and violence. The report suggested that the police begin a campaign to seize all illegal firearms currently in use in the LGA, with a special focus on the unlawful pump action rifles often used by the vigilantes. The authors suggested that in order to weed out potential vigilante recruits with questionable morals, the recruitment of new members should also be closely scrutinized. As Okeke (2013) maintained that since the end of the military rule, crime has escalated, leading to the growth of heavily armed vigilante groups in almost every region of Nigeria. The vigilante security apparatus stopped turning over suspected criminals to the police and instead started carrying out extrajudicial executions and killings of suspected criminals as a result of the public's declining trust in the police and their mutual mistrust or distrust of the vigilante security apparatus.

The International Crisis Group (2022), a global organization that conducts conflict research and prevention, documented in a report that vigilante groups can range in size from modest volunteer groups in rural and urban areas to substantial state-level institutions. It was mentioned that a variety of circumstances were responsible for the rise of many vigilante

groups in Nigeria that were committed to preventing crime and defending the public. There is a high rate of unemployment, rise in impunity, decline in the NPF's capacity to protect communities, decline in public confidence in the government's commitment to protecting the populace, and a generalized lack of security. These trends are forcing communities and ethnic groups to devise novel means of self-defense. The research claims that vigilante groups are filling important security gaps, earning them favor with the public and the government. The research issued a warning that if vigilante group expansion and excesses are not checked, insecurity may continue.

In addition, the report showed that many vigilante group members lack adequate training, resources, and supervision. As a result, its members are more likely to commit human rights violations and fall victim to elite manipulations. In the long run, ethnic and communal tensions may increase as a result of the efforts of groups defending certain regions or ethno-religious groupings. The ICG urged the Nigerian government to quickly restore public confidence and further recommended that it implement comprehensive police reform, strengthen the judiciary's ability to expedite the delivery of justice, and devolve policing authority to state and local levels in order to deter groups and communities from forming additional vigilante groups.

On their part, Osakwe and Audu (2019) noted that the features of vigilante groups' cultures and the motivations behind their existence have an impact on the variety of organizational structures and operational strategies they employ in Nigeria. The objectives of many of them - several of which could be categorized as militias - are related to Nigeria's many societies and religions. However, there are some organizations that, without endorsing any particular political, economic, or religious perspectives, concentrate purely on eliminating crime from Nigerian communities. Furthermore, Osakwe and Audu (2019) noted that on March 18, 1999, the Corporate Affairs Commission formally registered the vigilante group, establishing it as the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) with nine Board of Trustees members. The VGN had developed a detail Constitution by March 2003 to regulate its members and activities.

Their study of the VGN, which was created to bring willing vigilante groups under a single national umbrella, showed a distinctive and fascinating facet of vigilantism in Nigeria. In order to engage professionally with national law enforcement authorities, this later gained federal support, the VGN as a whole actually paints a clear and comprehensive picture of vigilantism in Nigeria. Similar to other law enforcement organizations in Nigeria, there is a persistent issue

with inadequate funds and logistics to boost operational efficiency as well as capacity building and manpower development for the majority of members who are still predominantly illiterate.

From the foregoing, there are gaps in the literature on the proliferation of armed vigilante groups in Nigeria, especially its tacit and official endorsement by governments and the general public; thereby necessitates the need to update literature regularly. This makes the paper unavoidably crucial.

2. Theoretical Framework

Notably, various works on armed vigilante groups mostly rely on structural functionalism as the theoretical framework to explain the phenomenon, noting that they are structures of security. However, the General Systems Theory (GST) is the framework adopted in this paper. Although some forms of the systems theory were in existence earlier, it was Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a biologist and philosopher, is regarded as a key proponent in mid-twentieth-century systems theory. He argued against the "mechanistic, one-way causal paradigm of classical science" and favored an organismic model of biology beginning in the 1920s. Within the theoretical biology problem framework, Bertalanffy defined the distinctions between closed and open systems, causality and functional complexity, and a broader concept of entropy (Müller, 1996: 64). These terms are still used in systems theory and other fields today.

Similar to this, David Easton adopted the GST for political science in his 1965 book titled *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. According to this theory, men's social, economic, and political activities are processes, and society as a whole is made up of several processes and aspects. Briefly stated, the general systems theory emphasizes the idea that all elements and facets of society are interconnected and that only a thorough investigation can shed light on politics' fundamental nature. By the system's interaction with the environment, new properties continue to emerge as it evolves.

The key argument here is that armed vigilante groups are part and parcel of the general security system in Nigeria that performs the functions of protection of lives and property. The proliferation of armed vigilante groups in Nigeria is due to systemic defects than anything else. The general security architecture of the country consists of formal agencies like military and para-military forces and informal organizations, and armed vigilante groups are part of the informal security sector establishment that performs security duties. The relevance of the GST rests in the claim that it can take advantage of parallelisms developing across several scientific

disciplines and lay the groundwork for the integration of complex organizations in and of themselves. This can be seen in the emerging routines of security outfits in Nigeria.

3. Method of Study

The study used qualitative research design and data was mainly derived from secondary sources. Similarly, books, journal articles, conference papers, magazines and internet materials were the major sources of secondary data.

The data analysis was subjected to content analysis and discussions were based in themes presented under sub-headings. The scope of the study was the proliferation of armed vigilante groups in Nigeria in contemporary times, while drawing from its historical emergence.

4. Types of Vigilante Groups in Nigeria

In Nigeria, vigilante groups are categorized in a number of different ways. The various vigilante group types are not strict or exclusive, however, as one group may blend elements of two or more of these types. For instance, militant and non-militant groups have been used as a classification system to separate the various categories of informal security actors. However, this classification is arbitrary because a non-militant group could turn into a militant one and vice versa or even combine both characteristics, making it challenging to distinguish between the two groups. It is clear that vigilante groups function as thugs for elitist political leaders, defending ethnic groups and protecting lives and property (Fourchard, 2008).

Furthermore, four different categories of vigilante groups that exist in Nigeria have been identified (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2004). These include (a) neighborhood or community watch, which are vigilante groups formed by residents of a neighborhood or community primarily to protect and defend their interests; (b) ethnic vigilante groups, which are organizations formed along ethnic lines to defend ethnic interests; (c) religious vigilante groups, which are faith-based organizations formed by members of a religious organization to protect, defend, and promote their beliefs; and (d) State-sponsored vigilante groups, which function with the backing of local, state or/and federal governments.

Tacit or Official Endorsement

The growth of armed vigilante groups has unexpected repercussions in that it has received both unofficial and official approvals in Nigeria. Many areas in pre-colonial history had institutions

responsible with preventing invasions, suppressing crime, maintaining order, enforcing adherence to social customs and laws, and promoting moral behavior among society's members. People were shielded from harm by organizations, for instance, among the Hausa in the north like yan banga (community guardians), yan baka (hunters), and dogarai (palace guards). Equally, in the south-west, Yoruba hunting guards, cultural organizations like ogboni and oro, as well as egungun masquerade groups, fought crime and promoted public morals. Similarly, among the ethnic Igbo people in the south-eastern Nigeria, the ndi nche (village or community guards), with the aid of "age grade groups" and "masquerade societies" maintain law and order. These indigenous structures of security that had existed for centuries, which were very effective in curbing crime and criminality in traditional societies prior to colonial conquest in Nigeria, became informal models of policing and was relegated to the background during colonialism.

The British conquest of the many communities that would later be combined to constitute modern-day Nigeria led to the establishment of the police in 1930 by the colonial authority, which claimed a monopoly on the use of force. In some regions, Native Authority police were also introduced. Colonial officials suppressed groups they deemed threatening and usually disregarded the indigenous policing procedures. Despite this, residents nevertheless engaged in community policing activities in a number of contexts, particularly in urban areas where rising crime rates were a result of rapid population growth and robust economic activity.

The federal, regional, and subsequently state governments continued to use the colonial police force after the country attained independence in 1960 while largely disregarding alternative or conventional institutions. Colonel Adetunji Olurin of Oyo state and Colonel David Mark of Niger state are two notable examples of military governors, who began urging citizens to band together to aid the police in fighting crime in the middle of the 1980s, much like they had done since 1966 when the military entered politics and after the Nigerian Civil War. However, in April 1987, Colonel Olurin issued an order creating the Oyo State Vigilante Group in response to an increase in crime, which included armed robberies in urban areas.

Since then, and especially since the 1999 handover of authority from the military to the civilian administration, many state governments have approved a number of organizations (ranging from joint military-police task forces to neighborhood watches) that function without a legal framework or sufficient oversight to help the police keep the streets safe. However, these groups' apparent growth and the variety of duties they do present new threats. One aspect that

is particularly worrisome is the emergence of ethnic vigilantes, which may have an impact on inter-ethnic and communal relations and, in turn, national security.

In the south-east of Nigeria, the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), the Bakassi Boys, Eastern Peoples' Congress, Biafra Liberation Council and other armed vigilante groups, some have become so militant insurgent groups exist, the dominant groups are the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) that are non-state groups engaged in protecting and defending the region. Their activities have prompted the state governments in the region to provide similar security outfits, while the Federal Government has out rightly proscribed these groups.

Though the Bakassi Boys originated in Abia State as a privately sponsored vigilante group, where in 1998 a group of shoemakers at Ariaria market in the commercial town of Aba organized an armed group to confront criminals in and around the market, the phenomenon have operated in the south-eastern region and has had official endorsements by governments in the region, notably in Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Eboyi and Imo States, with the various state house of assemblies passing the vigilante bills into law and assented to by the governors. Hence there exist the Abia State Vigilante Service, Anambra State Vigilante Service, Eboyi State Neighborhood Watch, Enugu State Neighbourhood Associations and Watch Groups, and Imo Security Watch and Vigilante Group. Similarly, there are numerous neighborhood watch and community-based vigilante groups in each of these states that are privately sponsored and armed to fight crime.

The south-western geo-political zone of Nigeria, which is made up of the six states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, and Oyo, is where many state and privately-sponsored vigilante groups are based. The O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC), which was first established in 1994 as a self-determination organization soon after the military invalidated the presidential election of June 12, 1993, which was widely believed to have been won by Yoruba man Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola, was until recently the most well-known vigilante group in the area. The OPC worked to advance the interests of the Yoruba ethnic group not only in the south-west but also in parts of the Delta and Edo states in the south-south, Kwara and Kogi states in the north central geo-political zones, and the Benin Republic, where some elements the ethnic group are found. Despite the fact that Olusegun Obasanjo, a fellow Yoruba man, was elected president of the country from 1999 to 2007, correcting the injustice of the June 12 annulment, the OPC still festers and is likely to get even stronger because some of the factors that led to its formation are still present in the country.

Virtually each of the state governments in the zone has established its own vigilante organizations, such as the Ekiti State Vigilante Group, Lagos Neighborhood Safety Corps (LNSC), Vigilante Service of Ogun State, Harmonized Vigilante Group of Osun State and Oyo State Vigilante Group, in addition to the numerous privately sponsored vigilante groups. The governors of the states in the southwest have recently joined forces to launch Operation Amotekun to combat crime in the area. This was due to the many attacks and murders of farmers and travelers carried out by suspected Fulani herdsmen, which have greatly increased insecurity and exposed the clear incapacity and reluctance of the Federal Government-owned security forces to combat crime in the region. Due to the circumstances, even ordinary citizens, like Chief Sunday Adeyemi Egoh, organized others to combat and thwart the incursion of armed Fulani herdsmen into Yoruba land, particularly in the states of Kwara, Oyo and Ekiti, to commit heinous crimes.

Groups founded by disgruntled private citizens have gained international attention in the country's south-south geopolitical zone, which includes the states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Cross River, Edo, and Rivers. In particular, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, the Niger Delta Vigilante Group, and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), have drawn attention due to their public profiles in 2004 and threats to temporarily affect global oil prices, which resulted in significant economic losses for the nation (Soetan, 2017). The growth and development of various self-determination organizations that allegedly fought and agitated for a better deal for the Niger Delta from the Federal Government while also fighting criminality came into existence.

While numerous strong armed vigilante groups proliferates and operates at random across the south-south, there are many community-based ones with less capacity but strong enough to accomplish their goals exist in the region, some of the states have established their own security outfits to fight crime, such as the Akwa Ibom State Neighborhood Safety Corps, Bayelsa State Volunteer Service, Edo State Integrated Vigilante Service, and Neighborhood Safety Agency of the Rivers State Government.

It is noteworthy that the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) developed as a major actor in the battle against insurgency, complementing the efforts of the Nigerian military, as a result of the Nigerian government's incapacity to adequately address the security concerns posed by Boko Haram in the region of the North-east. The Federal Government of Nigeria and its armed forces officially and covertly support their actions. No military operation has been conducted since the CJTF's establishment in 2013 without its involvement. Similar to this, the CJTF and

Hunters Group (Sarkin Baka) are present in almost all of the states in the northeast region, particularly Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, where Boko Haram and other ethno-religious organizations are active (Onuoha and Kwaj, 2018).

Similarly, the North-west geopolitical zone comprises seven states – Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara, and many communities in the region have come under attacks of extremist Islamic Fundamentalist groups. This has made communities, the CJTF and Hunters Group to mobilized and organized vigilantes to defend and protect their communities. In addition, the dominant religion in these states is Islam and the various state governments have established the Hisbah to implement the sharia law.

In the North-central geopolitical zone, which consists of Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau states, there have been frequent clashes between herdsmen and farmers, which have led to the region experiencing insecurity for several years. The state administration of Benue banned all vigilante organizations that had been formed illegally in May 2021 after communities there had been targeted in recent years due to the passage of a legislation banning open grazing. Later, the governor signed a law permitting firearms for the state's volunteer guards and establishing a CJTF to enforce the law. The Federal Government's apparent tacit support of herders' actions while opposing the anti-grazing law of the Benue State Government made this situation worse. This in addition to opposition of the anti-grazing law by a loosely partisan advocacy organization called Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), which is dedicated to advancing the welfare of Fulani pastoralists in Nigeria. To combat the overabundance of armed herders in the various states, other State Governments in the region have also formed crime-fighting organizations like the Operation Rainbow of Plateau State and the Nasarawa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (NSYES).

In addition, many communities and ethnic groups in the region have set up vigilante groups to protect their communities. For instance, the Eggon ethnic group in Nasarawa State founded the Ombatse, which is a word in the native Eggon dialect meaning “the time has come”, or “our time has come” or “this is our time”. The group is a socio-political and religious organization, which ideology is to protect the Eggon ethnic group from oppression and annihilation by predator ethnic groups like the Hausa/Fulani and its surrogate ethnic groups. It has had various violent encounters with security forces in the past that have led to loss of lives and property.

The primary state security agencies in Nigeria are the military (the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Air Force, and Nigerian Navy), paramilitary forces (NPF, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and others), and intelligence community (Department of State Security (DSS), National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and others). The constitution required these agencies to provide specific security services and carry weapons. Most of the arms bearing groups set up by the various State Governments and privately sponsored ones carrying arms is illegal except authorized by the Federal Government's relevant agency. The constitution allows the NPF to issues permit to civilians, and not groups and communities, to bear arms. However, there are too many such unregulated arms bearing persons and entities across the nation and the dangers this posed are obvious.

Currently, the NSCDC regulate private security companies in Nigeria, but not the vigilante groups that are neither registered nor adequately regulated. In order to combat crude oil theft, maritime piracy, terrorism, and other crimes across the nation, the Federal Government has registered and employed the services of former militant commanders and their enterprises. These vigilante leaders and their groups have been covertly armed and equipped to provide security in numerous crisis situations, particularly in those areas where the security services have failed to provide the desired outcomes in the fight against crime. For instance, after meeting with the incumbent president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Asari-Dokubo spoke with state house correspondents claimed that his men were fighting on the side of government in Plateau, Anambra, Imo, Abia, Niger and Rivers States, with resounding successes and securing the Abuja-Kaduna Road. This is in spite the fact that he owns less than one per cent of the armament of the Nigerian military and criticized them for their insincerity in the fight against terrorism and oil theft (Arogbonlo, 2023, Jun 17). The military has, however, denied these allegations. The fact, however, remains that proliferation armed groups across the nation is a potent threat to national security.

5. Concluding Remarks

Armed vigilante groups have appeared in Nigeria as a result of both the rise in crime and the State's escalating incapacity to enforce law and order and so safeguard lives and property. These organizations are successful both in areas where the state is perceived as being dishonest or unreliable, as well as in areas where the state is unable to adequately protect its citizens from criminal behavior. Deep mistrust of the government and institutional security providers has resulted from the police's failure to defend fundamental security and citizens' human rights,

which fosters the rise of vigilante groups in the nation. Simply said, poor policing is a factor in the growth and resurgence of armed vigilante groups in Nigeria.

Furthermore, these groups' public perceptions frequently give a biased impression of vigilante groups as they are frequently characterized as being little more than irrational, unruly mobs or masses made up primarily of young individuals with no distinct social or political identities, who are also emotive and spontaneous. More alarmingly, some of these well-known groups are seen as militias advancing the political, religious, and ecclesiastical objectives of the private individuals or organizations funding them.

Over the past few years, different ethnic armed groups have appeared in Nigeria as a result of ethnic-based political groups fusing their political endeavors with security operations to combat general criminality in the areas they operate in, taking the form of vigilante groups. Unlawful detention, extrajudicial executions, torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or humiliating treatment of suspected offenders are just a few of the significant human rights violations committed by many of these widely state-endorsed and ethnic vigilante groups.

Therefore, it is urged that the Federal Government's ability to provide security and administer justice to its citizens, regardless of tribe or religious connections, ought to be improved. It is also suggested that the Federal Government promote police reform and strengthen judicial competence to administer justice impartially in order to improve security and combat impunity. In the same vein, given that the nation is a federation of many cultures and traditions, some police authority must be devolved to other levels of government like states and local governments. Once more, state and federal authorities should create legislation to better control vigilante groups and the risks related to their activities. On a concluding note, armed vigilante groups will continue to proliferate if they are not swiftly and effectively controlled, eventually turning into a monster that will hunt the nation. This is especially true in light of the fact that armed groups are currently wreaking havoc and destruction across the nation.

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