



The Political Economy of Violence and Security Governance in Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The protracted crisis in Plateau State, north-central Nigeria, is one of the most enduring manifestations of subnational insecurity in West Africa's Middle Belt. Since the 2001 Jos riots, the state has experienced recurring cycles of ethno-religious rioting, rural farmer–herder violence, and, most recently, coordinated night-time attacks on farming communities, most notably the December 2023 Christmas Eve massacres in Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, and Mangu Local Government Areas, in which independent monitors confirmed well over 190 deaths. This study interrogates the structural drivers, evolving dynamics, and governance failures underpinning the conflict. Adopting a descriptive, mixed-methods design that combines qualitative document analysis with a review of conflict-event data reported by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), government agencies, and human-rights organisations, the paper situates the Plateau crisis within the broader frameworks of political economy, environmental scarcity, identity politics, and state fragility. The review indicates that the conflict is multi-causal, involving competition over land and grazing corridors, the institutionalisation of indigene–settler citizenship distinctions, elite manipulation of ethnic and religious identities, arms proliferation, and the limited territorial reach of state security architecture, including the military's Operation Safe Haven. Documented casualty and displacement figures across episodes in 2001, 2008, 2010, and 2023 reveal a shift from urban, election-linked rioting toward ruralised, asymmetric, and increasingly lethal violence, with reported fatalities for Plateau State between 2023 and 2025 alone estimated at over 2,600. The paper argues that sustainable peace in Plateau State requires a shift from reactive, militarised responses toward integrated security-sector reform, land and grazing governance reform anchored on the National Livestock Transformation Plan, and structural socio-economic and legal reforms addressing indigeneity-based exclusion.

Keywords: Plateau State; Nigeria; farmer–herder conflict; indigene–settler divide; political economy of violence; security governance; state fragility.



1. Introduction

Plateau State occupies a distinctive and precarious position within Nigeria's federation. Situated in the country's north-central geopolitical zone, along the fault line separating the predominantly Muslim north from the predominantly Christian south, the state has since the early 2000s experienced recurrent cycles of violence that have made it one of the most studied, and most persistently unstable, subnational units in the Nigerian federation (Krause, 2011; Higazi, 2011). What began in September 2001 as an urban riot in the state capital, Jos, triggered by a dispute over a local government appointment, has evolved over two decades into a multidimensional security crisis encompassing ethno-religious rioting, land- and grazing-related farmer–herder violence, banditry, and, in its most recent phase, coordinated night-time attacks on rural farming settlements (Madueke, 2021).

The conflict is frequently framed in Nigerian public discourse, and at times in official government communication, as an ethno-religious confrontation between indigenous farming communities, principally the Berom, Anaguta, and Afizere, and settler pastoralist communities associated with the Hausa-Fulani (International Crisis Group, 2012). This binary framing, while capturing an important dimension of the violence, obscures deeper structural and political-economic dynamics: contested land tenure under the Land Use Act of 1978, the constitutional entrenchment of “indigene” status as a basis for political and economic rights, elite competition for control of local government structures, and the weak territorial reach of state security institutions (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Recent escalations have underscored both the persistence and the intensifying lethality of the crisis. In May 2023, attacks on villages in Mangu Local Government Area left more than 100 people dead (Al Jazeera, 2023). Seven months later, coordinated attacks across more than twenty communities in Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, and Mangu on Christmas Eve 2023 killed close to 200 people, injured hundreds more, and displaced tens of thousands (Amnesty International, 2024; Vanguard, 2023; World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa, 2024). Reporting drawing on conflict-monitoring sources indicates that more than 2,600 people were



killed in Plateau State between 2023 and May 2025 alone, placing the state alongside Benue as one of the deadliest theatres of communal violence in the Middle Belt (LSE Africa Blog, 2025). These developments raise urgent questions about the underlying drivers of the violence, the adequacy of state security responses, including the military's Operation Safe Haven, and the prospects for durable peace.

This study addresses three research questions: (i) What structural factors drive the recurrence of violence in Plateau State? (ii) How has the pattern and character of that violence evolved between 2001 and 2024? (iii) Why have successive state-led security interventions failed to produce lasting stability?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Subnational conflict of the kind experienced in Plateau State poses a direct threat to Nigeria's federal stability, to the human security of the communities affected, and to the country's broader development trajectory. Unlike the insurgency in the North-East or the criminal banditry of the North-West, the Plateau crisis is embedded in constitutionally sanctioned distinctions between “indigenes” and “settlers,” which structure access to land, political office, and public employment (Higazi, 2011). This institutional dimension makes the conflict unusually resistant to conventional counter-insurgency or policing responses, because the grievances animating it are, in part, produced by the state's own legal and administrative architecture.

Despite two decades of peace conferences, presidential panels, and a standing military task force, violence in Plateau State has neither been resolved nor contained; rather, its geography has shifted from urban Jos to the state's rural southern and central senatorial zones, and its tactics have shifted from mob rioting to coordinated, firearm-enabled night raids on undefended villages (Madueke & Vermeulen, 2018). This escalation, occurring despite the presence of Operation Safe Haven since 2010 and the launch of the National Livestock Transformation Plan in 2019, points to a persistent gap between the scale of security investment and the outcomes achieved. This study is designed to close part of that explanatory gap by systematically tracing the structural drivers, the historical evolution, and the governance failures that together account for the persistence of violence in the state.



1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The broad aim of this study is to examine the structural drivers, historical evolution, and governance dimensions of violence in Plateau State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the major structural and political-economic drivers of recurrent violence in Plateau State;
2. Trace the historical evolution of the crisis from the 2001 Jos riots to the 2023–2024 coordinated rural attacks; and
3. Assess the effectiveness of state-led security interventions, including Operation Safe Haven and the National Livestock Transformation Plan, and their implications for security governance and sustainable peace.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated framework that links the political economy of conflict, environmental scarcity, identity-based exclusion, and state fragility to explain the Plateau crisis. Drawing on work that highlights competition over land, political power, and economic resources as central drivers of civil violence, the analysis situates Plateau's recurrent unrest within struggles over land ownership, control of local government structures, and access to federal and state patronage that are refracted through ethnic and religious cleavages. At the same time, climate variability and the southward advance of desertification in northern Nigeria have intensified farmer–herder competition over land and water in Plateau and the wider Middle Belt, contributing to a highly lethal pattern of rural resource conflict. These material pressures interact with Nigeria's constitutionally entrenched indigene–settler distinction, which institutionalises exclusionary local citizenship regimes privileging recognised “indigenes” over long-settled communities and generates durable group grievances that outlive particular episodes of violence. Finally, the persistence of the Plateau crisis is understood in relation to the limitations of the Nigerian state's security and governance response, including the failure to reform indigeneity provisions, weak accountability for perpetrators, and the operational constraints facing interventions such as Operation Safe Haven. Taken together, this framework views violence in Plateau State as emerging from the intersection of material competition, environmental and demographic stress, institutionalised identity hierarchies, and ineffective security governance, and it guides the subsequent integration of historical trend analysis, casualty data, and governance-focused explanation within a single Plateau-specific analytical frame.



1.5 Empirical Review

Krause (2011) examined the drivers and human cost of ethno-religious violence in Jos between 2001 and 2010, drawing on more than seventy interviews with residents, community leaders, NGO staff, journalists, and local politicians conducted between 2010 and 2011. The study found that successive riots produced conservative death tolls of roughly 1,000 in 2001 and 700 in 2008, displaced tens of thousands of residents, and left the city increasingly segregated along religious lines, with “no-go areas” reshaping settlement, business, and transport patterns. The study recommended addressing the underlying indigene–settler dispute as a precondition for lasting peace.

Higazi (2011) analysed the historical and political drivers of the Jos crisis using documentary and field-based evidence spanning the 2001–2010 decade. The study estimated a cumulative death toll of at least 7,000 for the period, concentrated in two peaks (2001–2004 and 2008–2010), and traced the violence to the institutionalisation of indigene rights in Nigerian citizenship practice, which formally disadvantages settler communities in access to land, office, and public employment. The study argued that constitutional and legal reform of indigeneity, rather than security deployment alone, was central to a durable resolution.

International Crisis Group (2012) assessed the causes and trajectory of the Jos crisis through policy and field research covering the first decade of violence. The report found that the crisis stemmed from the unresolved constitutional privileging of indigene rights over residency-based citizenship, compounded by weak accountability for perpetrators of violence, and recommended constitutional reform alongside a dedicated framework for prosecuting electoral and communal violence.

Madueke and Vermeulen (2018) examined the spread and recurrence of communal violence across Jos and its rural periphery using a comparative case analysis of riot episodes between 2001 and 2018. The study found that violence diffused outward from the city into rural local government areas over time, and that recurrence was sustained less by any single trigger than by an accumulated cycle of unresolved prior grievances and reprisals, a pattern the authors term a self-reinforcing conflict trap.



Madueke (2021) investigated the internal sequencing of ethnic riots in Jos, using process-tracing of the 2001, 2008, and 2010 episodes. The study found that each riot followed a broadly similar sequence, an initial localised trigger, rapid ethnic and religious mobilisation, and escalation into city-wide violence, and argued that this repeated sequencing reflected the durability of underlying group grievances rather than the specific triggering incident in each case.

International Crisis Group (2021) evaluated the design and early implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan, launched in 2019 to curb farmer–herder violence nationally, including in Plateau State. The study found that inadequate political leadership, funding uncertainty, and a shortage of technical personnel, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, had slowed the transition of pastoralists into ranching, and recommended prioritising pilot ranches, donor commitments, and staff training to preserve the Plan's viability. While the earlier reviewed studies focused on the historical and identity dimensions of the crisis, this study's focus on land and livestock governance reform helps explain the persistence of rural violence into the 2020s, a gap the present study also addresses through its integration of historical casualty trends with governance analysis.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study synthesises three complementary theoretical perspectives.

1. Political Economy of Violence: conflict emerges from rational competition among groups and elites over scarce material resources, principally land, and over control of the political and administrative institutions that allocate those resources (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).
2. Frustration–Aggression Theory: socio-economic deprivation, blocked expectations, and perceived exclusion generate psychological frustration that, under conditions of weak restraint, translates into collective violent mobilisation (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939).



3. State Fragility Theory: weak, under-resourced, or partisan state institutions are unable to manage or arbitrate communal conflict impartially, allowing episodic violence to become self-reinforcing and protracted (Rotberg, 2003).

Applied jointly, this framework allows the Plateau crisis to be read simultaneously as (i) a contest over material resources and political power; (ii) a product of accumulated grievance among both indigene and settler communities who perceive the state and each other as having blocked their legitimate expectations; and (iii) the outcome of an under-institutionalised security and land-governance architecture unable to resolve the underlying disputes. This integrated approach mirrors the multi-causal explanation advanced in the empirical literature and avoids reducing the conflict to a single ethno-religious cause.

1.7 Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive, mixed-methods design combining qualitative document analysis of policy reports, academic literature, and human-rights investigations with a structured review of quantitative conflict-event data reported by ACLED, government agencies, and international monitors, an approach appropriate for a conflict whose drivers span institutional, economic, and historical dimensions that are not reducible to a single dataset. Data were drawn from secondary sources covering the period 2000–2025, including reports of the International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Health Organization, the Geneva Declaration Secretariat/Small Arms Survey, ACLED conflict-event summaries, and Nigerian and international news media reporting on specific violent episodes. The data were analysed using descriptive trend analysis to identify the direction and intensity of violence across documented episodes, historical periodisation to trace the evolution of the conflict's geography and tactics, and qualitative content analysis to identify recurring structural themes across the reviewed sources.

Although secondary data provide access to credible historical and institutional information, the study faced some limitations. Casualty figures for the same incident frequently vary across reporting agencies, reflecting differences in access, timing, and verification methods; where this occurs, the study reports the range rather than a single figure. Rural violence, particularly



in remote areas with limited security or media presence, is also likely under-reported relative to urban incidents, and prevailing insecurity constrained independent primary field data collection, such that the study relies exclusively on secondary and documentary sources.

1.8 Historical Evolution of the Crisis

The historical evolution of the Plateau crisis can be traced across four interlinked phases, beginning with pre-2001 foundations in colonial tin-mining migration and postcolonial local government reorganisation that entrenched a durable divide between communities classified as indigenous and later migrant communities such as Hausa-Fulani settlers, embedding unequal access to land and political representation well before the outbreak of large-scale violence. The second phase, from 2001 to 2010, was marked by high-intensity urban and peri-urban sectarian rioting in Jos, including the September 2001 riot over a federal appointment, which killed around 1,000 people in a week of fighting, the November 2008 riot following a disputed local election with roughly 700 deaths, and further violence in January 2010 that displaced about 18,000 residents; cumulative estimates suggest at least 7,000 deaths and up to 220,000 displaced across the decade. After the creation of Operation Safe Haven in 2010, violence shifted into a third phase in which large-scale rioting in Jos subsided but conflict ruralised into southern and central senatorial zones, increasingly revolving around disputes over farmland, grazing routes, and cattle theft and coinciding with a national surge in farmer–herder clashes that prompted the 2019 National Livestock Transformation Plan. The most recent phase, from 2020 onward, features hybrid, coordinated firearm-enabled night attacks on rural settlements often attributed to armed groups described as herder militias, including the May 2023 Mangu attacks that killed over 100 people and the Christmas Eve 2023 attacks across Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, and Mangu, for which agency estimates range from around 160 to over 330 deaths, illustrating persistent variance in casualty reporting; conflict-monitoring data indicate that more than 2,600 people were killed in Plateau State between 2023 and May 2025, a lethality unprecedented since the 2001–2010 decade. The historical evolution of the Plateau crisis can be traced across four interlinked phases, beginning with pre-2001 foundations in colonial tin-mining migration and postcolonial local government reorganisation that entrenched a durable divide between communities classified as indigenous and later migrant communities



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1.9 Findings and Discussion

Documented Trends in Violence

Table below summarises documented casualty figures for major violent episodes in Plateau State between 2001 and 2025, drawn from the sources reviewed in this study. Two trends are evident. First, while the 2001–2010 decade produced the highest single-incident death tolls, driven by large-scale urban rioting, the cumulative fatalities recorded for 2023–2025 approach and, on some estimates, exceed the toll of that earlier decade, despite the intervening deployment of a standing military task force. Second, the locus of violence has shifted decisively from the state capital, Jos, to rural local government areas in the state's southern and central senatorial zones, principally Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, and Mangu.



Episode	Reported Deaths	Location	Source
2001 Jos riots	~1,000	Jos metropolis	Krause (2011)
2008 Jos riots	~700	Jos North LGA	Krause (2011)
2010 Jos unrest	Not separately confirmed; ~18,000 displaced	Jos metropolis	Krause (2011), citing IRIN (2010a)
Cumulative, 2001–2010	≥ 7,000 (~5,000 in 2001–04; ~2,000 in 2008–10)	Statewide	Higazi (2011)
May 2023 Mangu attacks	100+	Mangu LGA	Al Jazeera (2023)
December 2023 Christmas Eve massacres	161–335 (range across agencies)	Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, Mangu LGAs	Amnesty International (2024); Vanguard (2023); WHO/AFRO (2024)
Cumulative, 2023–May 2025	2,600+	Statewide	LSE Africa Blog (2025)

Source: Compiled by the author from the cited secondary sources, 2026.



1.10 Structural Drivers of Insecurity

Land Competition. Agricultural expansion, population growth, and the shrinkage of traditional grazing corridors have intensified disputes between farming and pastoralist communities over land access (Benjaminsen et al., 2012).

Identity and Exclusion. The institutionalisation of the indigene–settler distinction in Nigerian citizenship practice formally privileges groups classified as indigenous in access to land, political office, and public employment, entrenching group-based grievance independent of any single incident (Higazi, 2011).

Elite Manipulation. Political actors at state and local government level have been documented mobilising ethnic and religious narratives to secure electoral advantage, converting resource disputes into identity confrontations (International Crisis Group, 2012).

Arms Proliferation. The circulation of small arms, facilitated by porous regional borders and weak arms control, has increased the lethality of attacks that would previously have been confined to farm-boundary skirmishes (Krause, 2011).

Weak and Overstretched Security Institutions. Assessments of Operation Safe Haven point to persistent shortfalls in personnel, logistics, and territorial coverage, resulting in delayed responses to attacks in remote rural communities; residents in the December 2023 attacks reported response times of several hours despite early distress calls (Amnesty International, 2024).

Changing Nature of Violence

The character of violence in Plateau State has shifted markedly since 2010: from crowd-based urban rioting concentrated in Jos to coordinated, firearm-enabled night raids on dispersed rural settlements; from violence loosely tied to electoral cycles to attacks recurring independently of any electoral trigger; and from largely localised skirmishes to attacks explicitly targeting civilians, homes, and agricultural assets across multiple communities within a single coordinated episode, as in December 2023 (Madueke & Vermeulen, 2018).



Institutional and Policy Responses

Table 4 traces the principal state and federal interventions introduced in response to the crisis since 2010. The record shows a security architecture that has been repeatedly restructured and supplemented with parallel peacebuilding and land-reform initiatives, yet without a sustained reduction in fatalities: the December 2023 massacres and the 2,600-plus deaths recorded for 2023–2025 occurred well after the establishment of Operation Safe Haven, the state peace commissions, and the National Livestock Transformation Plan, indicating an implementation and coordination gap rather than an absence of policy attention.

Year	Intervention	Scope / Outcome
2010	Special Task Force established (renamed Operation Safe Haven, OPSH, in 2015)	Joint military/police deployment to Plateau; mandate later extended to Bauchi and parts of Kaduna
2016	Plateau State Peace Building Agency established	First of three Middle Belt state peace institutions (with Kaduna, 2017, and Adamawa, 2018); constrained by limited funding and independence
2019	National Livestock Transformation Plan launched	Ten-year federal–state ranching and grazing-reform programme; implementation slowed by funding gaps and weak political leadership
2024	Federal Ministry of Livestock Development created	Consolidated federal oversight of ranching reform and grazing-reserve rehabilitation
2025	OPSH rebranded “Operation Enduring Peace”	Reorganisation intended to address acknowledged operational and structural



Year	Intervention	Scope / Outcome
		shortfalls in the previous task force

Source: Krause (2011); Kew (2021); International Crisis Group (2021); Ecofin Agency (2025); Punch (2025).

1.11 Discussion

The findings indicate that the Plateau crisis cannot be attributed to a single causal factor. It reflects the convergence of contested land and grazing governance, an exclusionary indigene–settler citizenship regime, elite incentives to mobilise identity for political advantage, and a security architecture whose territorial reach has consistently lagged behind the geographic spread of the violence it is intended to contain. Read through the study's theoretical framework, the persistence of the crisis illustrates the limits of a purely security-led response: Operation Safe Haven, whatever its tactical successes in specific localities, has not been able to substitute for the land-governance and citizenship reforms that the political-economy and state-fragility literatures identify as necessary conditions for durable resolution.

The shift from urban to rural violence also has an important governance implication: rural communities are structurally harder to secure with a conventional, garrison-based military task force than a compact urban centre such as Jos was in 2001, which helps explain why fatality levels have again approached historic highs despite fifteen years of continuous military deployment. This underscores the case, made in the National Livestock Transformation Plan and in Crisis Group's assessments, for community-based and intelligence-driven security models operating in tandem with land and grazing reform, rather than for military presence alone (International Crisis Group, 2021).

1.12 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The analysis points to a set of integrated policy priorities spanning security-sector reform, land and grazing governance, citizenship and legal change, and socio-economic and peacebuilding initiatives. First, security responses need to move from largely reactive, militarised



deployments toward intelligence-driven, community-anchored policing and better-resourced joint operations, with forward bases located near historically targeted rural communities and equipped for rapid response; this is essential to close the response-time gaps evident in recent coordinated night attacks. Second, land and grazing governance reform should include accelerated, transparent implementation of the ranching components of the National Livestock Transformation Plan in Plateau State, negotiated land allocation under the Land Use Act, and jointly managed local mechanisms for resolving disputes over grazing routes and farm boundaries. Third, structural citizenship and legal reforms are needed to address the exclusionary indigene-settler regime and the culture of impunity, including reviewing the constitutional and administrative basis of indigeneity in line with long-standing recommendations and strengthening prosecution of communal violence. Finally, sustainable peace will require investment in rural economic revitalisation and youth employment in highly affected local government areas such as Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, and Mangu, together with institutionalised, adequately funded intercommunal dialogue platforms that improve on earlier, under-resourced peace commissions. Taken together, these measures respond to a crisis that is multi-dimensional—rooted in land and resource competition, entrenched citizenship hierarchies, elite manipulation of identity, arms proliferation, and limited territorial reach of security institutions—and they recognise that fatality levels in 2023–2025 have approached those of the violent 2001–2010 decade even as violence has shifted from urban Jos to the rural south and centre. Future research can build on this study by incorporating field-based primary data collection and econometric analysis of event datasets such as ACLED to more precisely estimate the relative causal weight of each structural driver and to test the effectiveness of different reform trajectories.

1.13 Conclusion

The Plateau State crisis is a complex, multi-dimensional conflict shaped by land and resource competition, an exclusionary indigene-settler citizenship regime, elite manipulation of identity, arms proliferation, and the limited territorial reach of state security institutions. Documented casualty trends show that, despite fifteen years of continuous military deployment under Operation Safe Haven, fatality levels recorded for 2023–2025 approach those of the violent 2001–2010 decade, even as the locus of violence has shifted from urban Jos to the state's rural south and centre. Sustainable peace requires moving beyond reactive, militarised responses toward integrated security-sector reform, land and grazing governance reform, and structural legal and socio-economic change addressing the roots of exclusion. Future research should incorporate field-based primary data collection and quantitative econometric modelling



of ACLED conflict-event data to more precisely establish the causal weight of each structural driver identified in this study.

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