

## The Historical Ascendancy of Kidnapping in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*The increasing cases of kidnapping in the country particularly in the North-East and North West geopolitical zones have been a source of concern to the Nigerian government and the international community. Kidnapping which predates the independence of Nigeria is fast becoming worrisome and perplexing not only to Nigerians but to the international community particularly the multi-national and transnational companies. This has undoubtedly heightened the fear of international investors; thereby undermining the foundation of economic development in the country. The implication of kidnapping which has reared its ugly head in the country has worsened the labour market situation and recently the educational system. Consequently, it resulted to thousands of unemployment and displacement of the workforce from the affected areas. This ugly situation was reinforced by the global COVID-19 pandemic since the first quarter of 2020. This paper examines the historical background and ascendancy of kidnapping in Nigeria, with special reference to the possible causes and effects. Finally, the paper concludes with possible path-ways to curtail the incidence of kidnapping. The historical method was used in the collection, collation and interpretation of data.*

*Keywords: bandits, crisis, decades, kidnapping and punishment*

### Introduction

Nigeria which was once a peaceful country in Africa is now known as one of the crisis-ridden nations that attract international attention. There is no gainsaying that a major problem in Nigeria today is insecurity occasioned by the activities of bandits. But a far greater problem is lack of an action plan to curtail the activities of these bandits who had been terrorising the people through kidnapping. In the last two decades, Nigeria has witnessed scores of kidnappings. There is a need for socio-political reordering to enhance Nigeria's development and force government to look into matters before it is too late.<sup>1</sup> The origin of kidnapping could be traced to force government to intervene in the degenerating socio-political situation in different parts of the country. During the last two decades, the Niger Delta and the savannah regions of Nigeria had been enmeshed in insecurity occasioned by kidnapping. There is ample evidence to suggest that Nigeria's wealth has not benefited most Nigerians, especially those in the oil-rich region of the country, but that is not suggesting that, the only potent solution is kidnapping. The incidence of kidnapping has assumed widespread dimensions since the beginning of

the 21st century. The rate of kidnapping in Nigeria is said to be geometrically increasing such that more people are been kidnapped daily. Painful, we read in Nigerian newspapers daily are the unfortunate and seemingly helpless reactions by past presidents and the present ones such as, “*We condemn every attack of bombing of all kinds, killing, and kidnapping,*” but proffer no solution.<sup>2</sup> In fact, recent manifestations of electoral violence, most importantly since the birth of the Fourth Republic in 1999, have assumed an unprecedented magnitude and changing form of kidnapping, resulting in instability in democratic consolidation as well as the loss and displacement of many innocent lives.

### **Origins of Kidnapping**

Literally, the malady called kidnapping in Nigeria is derived from the words “kid,” meaning child and “nab,” which means to snatch. There is no universally accepted or adopted definition of kidnapping because it varies from state to state and jurisdiction to jurisdiction. As such, it is difficult to state in absolute terms the meaning of kidnapping. Kidnapping is the forceful seizure, taking away and unlawful detention of a person against his/her will.<sup>3</sup> It is the act of taking a person or group of persons into captivity in order to achieve a defined aim. The act places a victim on hostage for the purpose of using the abducted to attain a goal. Therefore, to kidnap, there must be two parties which include the living-prey on one hand and the heartless-predator who are there to manipulate terror, in order to attain an outlined objective. Kidnapping is also seen as a crime of seizing, confining, abducting or carrying away of persons by force or fraud often subjecting him or her to involuntary servitude in an attempt to demand a ransom or in furtherance of another crime. Therefore, it is an act of snatching and seizing of a person in order to collect a ransom in return or settle some scores of disagreement among people.

It must be noted that kidnapping is not a recent phenomenon globally and not peculiar to a particular region or location. The phenomenon of kidnapping is not also peculiar to developing countries, it is a global occurrence. It has been growing over the years in both developed and developing nations as an industry affecting every level of the society and motivated by diverse reasons. It predated the independence of African states. During the slavery era, there was kidnapping. As a matter of fact, kidnapping was identified as one of the methods used by slave dealers to recruit slaves (sources of slave). However, it was mentioned by numerous scholars that the modern usage of the term “kidnapping” is deeply rooted in the 17th century Britain where infants of rich families were caught in the sleep for ransom and are in most cases sold as slaves or agricultural workers to colonial farmers. Centuries before, in ancient Rome, Emperor Constantine

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(AD 315) became so alarmed by the incidence of kidnapping that he decreed it a capital offense. Similarly, in the Middle Ages in Europe, King Richard I of England was held hostage for years by the Archduke of Austria in the 12th century.<sup>4</sup>

However, in Nigeria, the advent of kidnapping predates the colonial period. People were kidnapped as a method used in recruiting slaves in the pre-colonial era. However, the current wave of kidnapping in Nigeria started on 25th February 2006 by the abduction of expatriates working for the oil companies in the Niger Delta area. Kidnapping displayed as an open message to the world for many years of injustice, marginalisation, alienation, and underdevelopment of the area. As kidnapping was first used as a weapon to fight for economic and environmental injustice in the Niger Delta, the economic motivation was intermittently used as a means to fund and sustain the fight. The beginning of 2007 saw the emergence of various other deviant groups by various names that hide under liberation struggle to commit economic crimes. Since then, the menace had become boldly commercialised in several parts of the country. In contemporary Nigeria, the implications of kidnapping are not only on the foreigners; sadly, it now includes locals, such as; adult females and males, the poor and the rich, the aged, and children.<sup>5</sup> But most recently, the crime has taken a dramatic dimension, threatening the existence of mankind in Nigeria. This unfortunate malady that is now manifest in all the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria has extended from the kidnapping of expatriates to men of God and their children, Nigerian politicians and their children, and other wealthy personalities as well as political opposition figures. Most of the hostages are released unharmed after payment of ransom. Gangs have taken advantage of the breakdown in law and order in some parts of the country to target any high profile expatriate or Nigerian that could provide them with a large ransom. Recently, Fulani herdsmen and the extremist Islamic sect popularly known as Boko Haram have also joined the league of kidnapers to achieve their set goals. Historically, the extant literature on kidnapping points to the fact that no one is free from being kidnapped. In Nigeria, the kidnapers are everywhere targeting both foreigners and non-foreigners alike with little or no resistance from our law enforcement agents. Nigerian security system has been weakened in the face of this confrontation, and very little has been done to find and address the socio-economic and underlining factors precipitating this crime.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Rationale Behind Kidnapping in Nigeria**

The phenomenon of kidnapping globally has been attributed to a number of factors such as unemployment, bad governance, poverty, economic depression, inadequate security among other germane factors. For instance, in Nigeria like every other nation in sub-Sahara Africa, and the rest of the globe, the

preponderance of the phenomenon of kidnapping is attributed to political, economic and social factors, most especially unemployment, poverty and economic depression.

In the first instance, the wide spread of kidnapping as a business in Nigeria is attributed to poor leadership on the part of the ruling class who are unresponsive to this state of insecurity as they over concentrate on how to acquire political power at the expense of development and above all, their political promises during campaigns. They place and give little or no value to matters concerning greater national aspirations and the dignity of lives of the people. Increasing rate of kidnapping and other criminal activities is a manifestation of the failure of leadership in the country. The nation's political leadership is too engrossed with the issue of power acquisition because of what they personally get out of it and while negating the responsibilities expected of them. The character of the political leadership at all levels contradicts the logic and philosophy of governance which essentially is the promotion of human dignity and the protection of core values of society.<sup>7</sup>

Trailing behind leadership failure on the part of the ruling class is unemployment among the employable youths who are vulnerable to social vices. In Nigeria, many unemployed youths are poverty afflicted and usually find comfort in heinous crimes such as kidnapping because they are unemployed and poor in the sense that school drop-out and graduates roam around the streets, unemployed for years. It is no longer news that the unemployment factor in Nigeria with its alarmingly increasing rate, is among the country's top five headaches. Neither is it news that this evil monster, unemployment, has succeeded massively in pouring into the minds of its victims, bright but negative thoughts and ideas on how to make fast cash, by ignoring all cautions. Today, the newest idea seems strongly to be 'kidnapping.' As the saying goes, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." Worse still, even when some people strive to be creative, there is no government incentive to empower the youths. If people are empowered, if people are given jobs to do, most of these crimes will be reduced.

Another reason for kidnapping is the deterioration of our value system in the country. The much cherished value system in the pre-colonial era has been thrown to the dogs. As a matter of fact, in Nigeria today we have mortgaged the culture of respect, love for human lives, hard work, friendliness and receptiveness to strangers in exchange of the western culture and ostentatious orientation. These have given impetus to modern crime and social evil destroying the core value of the society. This explains the absence of clear direction in those in the corridor of power who are pre-occupied with self-aggrandizement rather than pursuing policies that will benefit the society. It must be noted that celebrating people of

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questionable character is an indictment on the societal and moral value which such rulers should represent. Also, people who have donated money to develop their communities are rewarded with chieftaincy titles thereby creating a wrong impression in the minds of Nigerian youths who thereafter take to kidnapping. One of the noticeable reasons which encourage kidnapping to thrive is that people who celebrate such criminals end up encouraging them to do more. The high wave of crime in the country is fundamentally due to materialism and loss of societal values. People are ready to do anything to get rich and be celebrated in the society.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of poverty has been identified as one of the causes of kidnapping in Nigeria. Poverty is a multi-dimensional and complex phenomenon, encompassing not only material deprivation, but also other forms of deprivation, such as unemployment, ill-health, and lack of education, vulnerability, powerlessness and social exclusion. Poverty has serious consequences on the living conditions of the people and consequently on the socio-economic and political security of a nation which may prompt some of the youths into the activity of kidnapping. Poverty is the state of human beings who are poor; they have little or no material means of survival. Such socioeconomic deprivations include food, shelter, clothes, healthcare, education, and other means of living and improving one's life. Poverty is a potent reason that could make the youths vulnerable to all kinds of criminal activities such as kidnapping. The level of poverty in the country has no doubt increased the tempo of kidnapping among the youths who are ready to do anything at their disposal to make ends meet.

The rising acts of terrorism locally and internationally also contributed to the flame which has engulfed the nation in form of kidnapping. Some jobless and hungry youths in Nigeria have taken it upon themselves that terrorism is the solution to their numerous problems, as exemplified through the Nigerian government's long period exploitation of the Niger Delta people, which reflect on other agonised youths to use kidnapping as an alternate remedy to their problems.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the punishment for kidnapping in Nigeria is not commensurate with the act itself. The lack of adequate punishment which would have deterred people from kidnapping has encouraged many youths to indulge in the nefarious act. Most traditional legal systems in Africa used capital punishment as the last option for capital crimes; the lack of strict penalty on kidnappers largely explains why the menace is gaining ground in Nigeria. In addition, kidnappers see this unlawful business as rich fortune and therefore find it difficult to quit.

It is a known fact that lots of politicians in Nigeria are hungry for power and are indeed resolute to do anything in order to acquire power by all means. It is surprising and in fact unfortunate to observe that as election approaches children

and individuals with abnormalities such as imbeciles and psychologically-ill people are the targeted for rituals. Parents and relatives are strictly warned about the movement of individuals and to take precautions because of the ritual kidnapers who are often agents of politicians. This type of kidnapping usually occurred in Nigeria as a precursor for political campaigns for election.<sup>10</sup>

### **Consequences of Kidnapping in Nigeria**

The widening scale of insecurity in Nigeria is a cause for concern as all are affected by it. Churches, Mosques, markets, schools, homes and the highways, all are susceptible to this menace. The abductees and their families are traumatised by the ordeal of kidnapping. Foreign investors are scared away from Nigeria. Nigerians are paying the price of poor governance and failure of leadership. The menace of kidnapping has adversely affected inter-personal relations among Nigerians. Kidnapping has contributed to a relatively high level of mistrust among people. Few people still extend the traditional African hospitality to strangers. Some people do not acknowledge or return greetings by strangers nor oblige strangers asking for direction. Also, most people are unwilling to render help to people in distress for fear of being kidnapped. Few people would venture to stop to assist people calling for help on the express way. Increasingly, many people nowadays barricade themselves in their homes. Most devastatingly, it has been noted that, it is the fear of kidnapping that has contributed to the current high demand for police escorts by diverse public officials in the country, thereby further depleting the inadequate police personnel that could have been deployed to street crime control.

Kidnapping as a social problem that is bedeviling Nigerian societies has adversely affected our socio-economic development by scaring both local and foreign investors away from the country including some professionals who would have contributed meaningfully to the country among several others. This menace is reinforced by poverty, unemployment and moral decadence, abandonment of the youths by some politicians, corruption, inadequate relevant information to the security agents by citizens on where and when kidnapping incidents are taking place, inadequate sophisticated equipment for our security agencies for the tracking down of criminals and a host of others.

Proliferation of weapons in the country is on the increase as a result of the menace of kidnapping. Militancy, violence and kidnapping have contributed to the proliferation of small and large arms in the country. Nigeria has never before witnessed the types of light and heavy guns seen and recovered recently from Boko Haram. As a country, Nigeria has not previously been faced with the issue of guerrilla warfare and suicide bombing as perpetuated by Boko Haram. The use of

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improvised bombs for suicide attacks and their use in bank robberies in Nigeria are alarming. The most dangerous and dynamic trend in the use of dangerous weapons in Nigeria has been the training of children, who may become dangerous armed robbers and insurgents that could bring the country to a standstill. Aside from the proliferation of arms, the manner in which military and police uniforms are wantonly used as disguises to cause havoc among citizens is another trend that must worry a working government. Nowadays, it is known that communities are destroyed and people killed by men alleged to be in military or police uniform.<sup>11</sup> The menace of kidnapping has also inhibited the growth of tourism in the country. Both local and foreign tourists are weary of kidnap prone areas and therefore restrict their movements to areas considered to be relatively safe from kidnapping. Likewise successful sports men and administrators are scared to move around the country because, if they are not kidnapped, their parents may fall victims like the case of Mike Obi. Government workers are also afraid to go to work especially top civil servants such as permanent secretaries, directors and chief executive officers (CEOs) of parastatals and government agencies who have become prime targets of the kidnapers.

Equally noticeable is the fact that, the incidence of kidnapping is taking its toll on the educational sector as students are now scared to go to higher institutions in areas where kidnapping is prevalent and lecturers too are reluctant to seek appointment in areas where kidnapping is preponderant. The urge to carry out research is been limited for fear of kidnapping and researchers restricted their movement to relatively peaceful areas in the country. Similarly, as rightly pointed out, kidnapping for ransom is a violent crime, a negative event that usually happen suddenly, generating fear and helplessness threatens people's physical or psychological well-being and leaves victims in an emotional state which they are unable to deal with using their normal psychological resources. Apart from the suffering of the direct victim, the entire family structure is affected if such incidence occurs.

The victims of kidnapping suffer unimaginable ordeals in the hands of their captors as they are physically and emotionally tortured, most times in order to elicit quick responses from the relations of the victims towards their request. Irrespective of the type of kidnapping and the motive for its perpetration, the psychological and financial impact of the problem can be quite devastating for the victims. The victims also suffer indirect cost from the incidents. Some of the victims are killed in the process of kidnapping and some sustain various levels of injuries like bullet wounds which may deform them forever. Many victims suffer various degrees of assault, abuse, and torture in the hands of the kidnapers. Some of the female victims are even raped to death by the kidnapers. Generally,

most victims suffer severe traumatic pains from their experiences in the hands of the kidnapers.<sup>12</sup>

### **Measures to Eradicate Kidnapping in Nigeria**

Extant literature on kidnapping has shown that lack of commensurate punishment is one of the contributing factors reinforcing kidnapping in Nigeria. As such, curbing this social malaise is a requires collective approach, While we advocate that the culprits should be apprehended and punished as appropriate, more importantly public officers should shun corruption and ostentatious display of wealth. Focus should be centred on good governance with accountability, transparency and fair play. With these variables in place, kidnapping will become less attractive and in turn stimulate more sense of compassion, patriotism, sustainable development and nation building.<sup>13</sup>

Diversifying the economy to create employment and equipping the youths with appropriate skills especially life-coping skills as well as training for entrepreneurship could go a long way in curtailing the activities of kidnapping in the country.<sup>14</sup> Solution to the problem of youth unemployment must therefore be found in the diversification of the economy from oil to agriculture and agro-allied industries. If employment must be generated, the curriculum in both secondary and tertiary institutions must be reviewed in line with the demands of economic diversification. Similarly, the government as a matter of urgency need to revamps the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) programmes in order to, enhance training for young people who might be out of school and out of work. However, there is need to emphasize that needed is that which will provide the young people with marketable skills. Inadequate and faulty educational system in Nigeria is really a source of concern, there is a disturbing and growing mismatch between the skills of those looking for work and the skills employers seek to hire. If left unchecked, this could lead to a situation of a “lost generation,” where those with the necessary skills do very well while those without the desired skills will struggle economically for the rest of their lives.<sup>15</sup> Political leaders should desist from seeing their biological children as special and other unemployed youths as thugs by providing them with rifles and ammunitions to destabilise electoral process during election periods in order to achieve their selfish aim and later dumps them. Because whenever the unemployed youths are dumped they will judiciously make use of the weapons at their disposal to commit crime in order to survive.<sup>16</sup>

Value re-orientation in our societies could also go a long way in curbing kidnapping. Nigerian society has been affected by foreign culture that is detrimental to its morality and survival. Morality, honesty, integrity and a good



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name had been thrown to the dogs. Minds are corrupted because we praise armed robbers and corrupt politicians, and blame the good ones for not stealing from the government purse. There is need for people to go back to their roots, think of things that used to be valued in the society, and then re-orient themselves. Crime does not pay, and if unchecked will haunt future generations. We need to go back to basics and teach our children the value of hard work, honesty and integrity.

The rise and escalation in light and small arms trade have implications on the safety of the vulnerable society, including children and women as well as infrastructure. The illicit flow of arms creates a culture of violence and unstable society through criminal influence and illegal smuggling. The government needs to control the porous borders to eradicate illegal flows of weapons. Also, the local black-smiths have to be supervised and monitored on their production because they often produce weapons that end up in the wrong hands or with the perpetrators of crime such as kidnappers and other bandits. Also, there is no doubt that the high level of poverty in the country is a contributory factor to the incidence of kidnapping. There is urgent need for poverty alleviation programmes towards addressing high rate of poverty among women, youth and children who are vulnerable segments of the population mostly kidnapped by terrorists or insurgents and trapped by organised criminals, ending up in abduction for force labour. There is the urgent need to adopt tracking down devices (TDDs) such as Global Positioning System (GPS), Mobile Phone Tracking (MPT) and Location Aware System (LAS), design integrating Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) which is able to determine the location of pupils within the school premises, and also to map and determine guardian/ward relationship.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Kidnapping of all manner of persons has gained ascendancy in Nigeria. A malady previously unknown to the people has rapidly become domesticated. In the last two decades, the volatile oil rich regions of the Niger Delta witnessed this phenomenon on a large scale with the target being mostly expatriates and Nigerians in the oil business. It has spread throughout the country extending to the Northern and other parts. It is high time for the government of Nigeria to take drastic and necessary measures to curb the proliferation of kidnapping in Nigeria and the increasingly dangerous dimensions which the act is taking because it may result in widespread abandonment of residential places by residents and even government offices in order to avoid being captured and murdered by aggrieved unemployed youths

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