

## War On Crude Oil Bunkering, "Friendship" With Solid Minerals Mining: Is Nigeria a Double-Faced State?

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### Abstract

*Nigeria's extractive economy is marked by a striking paradox: a militarised "war" on crude-oil bunkering in the Niger Delta unfolds alongside the state's permissive stance toward the illicit solid-mineral mining in the North and Middle Belt. To unpack this contradiction, the study adopts a political ecology lens and a qualitative research design that is anchored in documentary and content analysis. The study utilized secondary data drawn from scholarly publications, government reports, policy briefs and credible media investigations, allowing for a critical interrogation of the narratives and silences that shape state responses to extractive activities. Findings reveal that selective governance in Nigeria is not a matter of weak institutional capacity but rather an intentional strategy of elite capture. Federal authorities deploy coercion and militarised violence when crude-oil revenues are threatened, yet tolerate and in some cases profit from informal solid-mineral extraction that sustains northern and central patronage networks. This asymmetric enforcement produces a geography of environmental injustice: oil-polluted creeks and devastated livelihoods in the Niger Delta on one hand and lead-poisoned mining communities in the North on the other. Beyond the ecological damage, the double standard normalises youth involvement in criminalised livelihoods, deepens regional grievances, erodes public trust in state institutions, and threatens federal cohesion. The article argues that such institutional hypocrisy inflates the long-term costs of environmental remediation and perpetuates inequitable resource politics. It concludes by recommending constitutional revenue reform, uniform environmental enforcement, transparency mandates, and community-centred remediation measures as essential steps toward transforming Nigeria from a "double-faced" to an equitable, accountable resource polity.*

**Keyword:** Crude Oil Bunkering, Selective Enforcement, Environmental Justice, Elite Capture, Solid Minerals, Political Ecology

### Introduction

Nigeria's status as a resource-rich country has defined its political economy since independence. The country sits atop vast natural endowments such as crude oil in the Niger Delta and a wide array of solid minerals scattered across various regions. Crude oil has remained the backbone of Nigeria's economy since the 1970s, and has accounted for about 90% of its foreign exchange earnings and over 50% of government revenue (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2022). The Niger Delta region which houses these oil reserves, is paradoxically one of the most impoverished, polluted and militarized zones in sub-Saharan Africa. This paradox often described as the "resource curse" reflects the fundamental contradictions of Nigeria's resource governance.

Despite producing an estimated 2 million barrels of oil per day and contributing significantly to global energy security, the Niger Delta has remained entrenched in underdevelopment and environmental degradation. Over the decades the region has become a hotbed of resistance that is marked by oil theft, which is popularly known as "bunkering," and militant agitation. While crude oil bunkering is criminalized and militarized, resulting in frequent joint task force operations, community raids and criminal prosecutions, a parallel extractive economy; solid

minerals mining has emerged in northern and central Nigeria with relatively little scrutiny or military interference (Obi, 2010; Omotola, 2006).

The Nigerian state's apparent dual posture aggressive in the oil-producing Niger Delta, lenient toward artisanal and informal mining in solid minerals is both puzzling and politically significant. This asymmetry raises deep concerns about institutional consistency, regional equity, and the underlying logic of state action. Crude oil theft is portrayed as an existential threat to the economy and treated as sabotage, while illegal mining operations, which have financed insurgencies and transnational criminal networks in places like Zamfara, Kano, Kaduna, and Niger states, are often met with silence or cosmetic interventions (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021).

This seeming contradiction becomes even more glaring when viewed through the lens of state capacity and elite interests. In the Niger Delta, decades of community agitation for resource control and environmental justice have been met with militarized crackdowns. Conversely in the North, artisanal mining has sometimes been promoted as a tool for poverty alleviation and local empowerment, despite overwhelming evidence of illicit foreign actors, smuggling cartels, and ecological damage (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; Ukoji & Ezeibe, 2020). Such selective state responses suggest the possibility of a politicized resource governance framework; one in which regional, ethnic and elite interests determine which extractive activities are deemed tolerable and which are criminalized.

Nigeria's extractive economy is therefore not merely an economic structure but a reflection of its fractured federalism and unequal citizenship. The differential treatment of oil and solid minerals extraction reflects deeper governance failures: rent-seeking by political elites, weak regulatory frameworks, corruption in security institutions and a chronic lack of accountability. Scholars like Watts (2004) and Omeje (2006) have long argued that Nigeria's oil economy is embedded in a complex web of violence, patronage and informal economies that sustain state fragility. The emerging politics around solid minerals now mirrors this trajectory albeit without the same level of public outcry or international attention. The rising tensions over illegal mining and the intensifying war on oil bunkering demand urgent academic attention. At stake is not only the future of Nigeria's extractive economy but also the legitimacy of the Nigerian state itself. Is the state a neutral arbiter of national resources or has it become a partisan actor enforcing selective justice based on regional or political expediency?

This article thus interrogates Nigeria's apparent double standard in dealing with extractive sector infractions. It draws on theories of the resource curse, political ecology, and state capture to examine the roots, dynamics, and implications of this asymmetry. Through contrasting the state's war on crude oil bunkering with its tacit "friendship" with unregulated solid minerals mining, the study aims to uncover the political economy of selective enforcement and the broader question: Is Nigeria a double-faced state?

### **Statement of the problem**

Nigeria's way of managing its resources is full of contradictions: while crude oil bunkering in the Niger Delta is treated as an existential threat that is often met with militarized crackdowns, surveillance technologies and securitized narratives, illegal solid minerals mining in parts of the North and Middle Belt has flourished with minimal state interference or oversight. This asymmetrical posture is not merely a reflection of policy oversight; it is symptomatic of a deeper crisis of selective governance, one shaped by elite interests, regional political alignments, and the politicization of security resources.

The Nigerian government's framing of oil bunkering as an act of economic sabotage has justified the deployment of military task forces and emergency interventions in the Niger Delta, often with devastating social and ecological consequences. Yet the same state apparatus appears indifferent or complicit in the face of widespread illegal mining activities that have fueled armed violence, environmental degradation and illicit financial flows in states like Zamfara, Niger and Kaduna (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013; GI-TOC, 2021). This contrast raises fundamental questions about the neutrality of the state and the coherence of its extractive governance logic.

What emerges is a governance architecture riddled with inconsistencies, where securitization is not driven by the scale of threat or illegality, but by geography, resource type, and political calculus. The criminalization of crude oil bunkering rooted in decades of agitation for resource control and justice is not matched by similar urgency in tackling the shadow networks of gold, lithium, and columbite extraction that operate with elite backing. This double standard not only exacerbates regional grievances and mistrust in federal institutions but also entrenches structural inequality in Nigeria's federal system.

The state's uneven treatment of extractive crimes undermines its credibility, then fuels subnational alienation and threatens the prospects of national cohesion. It signals a crisis of legitimacy, where justice is not evenly applied and where the rule of law bends to the convenience of political interests rather than the imperatives of equity, sustainability, and national unity.

### **Research Questions**

1. What explains the Nigerian state's militarized approach to crude oil bunkering in the Niger Delta compared to its relatively permissive stance on illegal solid minerals mining?
2. How do political, regional and economic interests shape the state's differential treatment of these extractive sectors?
3. In what ways does this governance asymmetry reflect deeper issues of state legitimacy, elite capture and regional inequality?
4. What are the broader implications of this duality for national unity, resource justice, and sustainable development in Nigeria?

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Crude Oil Bunkering in Nigeria**

Crude oil bunkering in Nigeria is a multifaceted phenomenon that straddles the line between organized criminality, environmental injustice and political rebellion. The term conceptually "bunkering" traditionally refers to the lawful supply of fuel or lubricants to ships or boats. In the Nigerian context however, it has taken on an illicit connotation. Illegal bunkering refers to the unauthorized siphoning, theft, refining or export of crude oil outside the officially sanctioned supply chains (Silas, 2015; Umar, 2024). Illegal oil bunkering operationally occurs through a range of sophisticated and rudimentary techniques. It includes puncturing pipelines, tapping wellheads, hacking into trunklines, using fraudulent bills of lading and explosive sabotage to divert crude to illegal storage or refining sites (Asuni, 2009; Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). According to Rufus (2018), the unique success of illegal bunkering in the Niger Delta, is largely enabled by the swampy, underdeveloped terrain, which renders security operations difficult and ineffective.

It is essential to disaggregate the umbrella concept of oil bunkering into its constituent practices. Scholars (e.g., Asuni, 2009; Ozogu, Chukwurah & Ukpung, 2023) identify three primary forms:

1. **Theft for Local Sale:** This involves small-scale theft of condensates and refined petroleum products meant for local distribution.
2. **Pipeline Hacking and Wellhead Tapping:** More sophisticated in nature, this form involves technical extraction using hoses, barges, and sometimes “Christmas tree” dismantling of oil wells.
3. **Export-Scale Diversion:** This is enabled through forged documentation and involves lifting beyond legal allocation for sale on international black markets.
4. **Sabotage and Blasts:** Often political in motivation, this category entails the use of dynamites to disrupt oil flow, not necessarily for economic extraction but to cripple state infrastructure (Bodo, 2019; Adishi, 2017).

Artisanal refining sometimes referred to colloquially as “kpo fire,” is the downstream activity where stolen crude is distilled in makeshift facilities to produce diesel, petrol and kerosene. While economically lucrative, this practice causes catastrophic environmental degradation (Ozogu et al., 2023; Tamori et al., 2020). Crude oil bunkering in Nigeria cannot be understood in isolation from its socio-political context. It thrives not just because of criminal opportunism but due to the structural failures of governance, poverty, environmental injustice and political marginalization. As Brock (2012) and Boris (2015) highlight, decades of neglect, inequality and ecological destruction in the Niger Delta created conditions for organized resistance, sometimes legitimized as economic survival.

Rufus (2018) argues that the geography and underdevelopment of the region alongside collusion by security agencies and oil sector officials allow bunkering to flourish. The activity is embedded within a vast often invisible supply chain involving local youths, artisanal refiners, elite financiers, corrupt state officials and transnational actors. Katsouris and Sayne (2013) describe the phenomenon as a form of “organized crime with political protection.”

Corruption impunity, and institutional weakness further deepen the crisis. The Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) has been implicated in opaque accounting and compromised oversight (Katsouris & Sayne, 2013). The ease with which massive volumes of oil are diverted daily as much as 300,000 barrels, costing Nigeria over \$1.7 billion monthly (Daily Trust, 2024) underscores a failure of both security and accountability mechanisms.

Crude oil bunkering is deeply intertwined with the historical and ongoing agitations in the Niger Delta. While some actors are purely driven by profit, others frame their actions as forms of resistance against economic exclusion and environmental injustice. As Bodo (2019) and Tombari et al. (2020) observe, the destruction of livelihoods through oil spills, gas flaring and land grabs has turned oil theft into a coping mechanism for survival among disenfranchised communities. Militants, local artisans and even women have found refuge in the informal oil economy, generating local income where formal opportunities are absent. Oil bunkering reflects a broader crisis of legitimacy and governance a space where the Nigerian state is absent or predatory. Illegal refineries, though environmentally hazardous, offer cheaper fuel alternatives and are seen by many locals as preferable to government indifference (Bodo, 2019).

### **Solid Minerals Mining in Nigeria**

Solid minerals refer to naturally occurring, non-renewable earth materials including metallic such as gold, iron ore, non-metallics like limestone, granite and energy minerals such as coal, bitumen extracted for economic use (Obaje, 2009; Orazulike, 2002). Legal mining operations are regulated through exploration licenses and mining leases that is governed by frameworks

such as the Minerals and Mining Act of 2007. These formalized activities contribute modestly to GDP, approximately 0.5% in 2018, enabled by investment in infrastructure and beneficiation processes (Obaje, 2009).

Illegal mining in contrast also termed "galamsey" in local parlance thrives outside regulatory regimes. This includes clandestine extraction, smuggling of valuable ores like gold and gemstones and the operation of artisanal processing sites with little to no environmental oversight (Orazulike, 2002). In 2017 Nigeria reportedly lost over 10,000 kilograms of gold to illicit channels, valued at approximately US\$400 million (Obaje, 2009). Illegal mining is therefore not merely a non-state activity, but an organized economy facilitated by weak enforcement, corrupt officials and porous borders.

The federal government in recent years has underlined its ambition to diversify the economy by expanding mining beyond oil and gas. Policy shifts for instance, requiring local processing as a condition for licensing seek to promote value-added production and local employment (Obaje, 2009). These reforms are intended to elevate formal sector activity and reduce dependence on crude oil revenues.

However, the licensing regime has also been criticized for opacity and elite capture. Reports indicate that some licenses favor political allies or well-connected investors, sidelining small-scale miners and perpetuating inequities (Obaje, 2009). At the same time, state governments most especially in mineral-rich northern regions have sometimes offered tax breaks and land incentives to attract investors, often without parallel commitments to sustainability or community welfare. This uneven regulatory environment promotes both a semi-legitimate extractive economy and a flourishing illegal sector operating in parallel.

Solid minerals are geographically dispersed across the country. Energy minerals like coal and bitumen are mostly found in the South-West; metallic ores iron, lead, zinc, gold and tin are abundant in the Middle Belt and North; industrial rocks and gemstones are widespread (Obaje, 2009). Despite this breadth, several states stand out as principal actors:

- i. **Plateau, Zamfara, and Kaduna States:** significant for artisanal gold mining, often in conflict-prone environments where non-state armed groups and criminal syndicates thrive.
- ii. **Ondo and Edo States:** centers for bitumen extraction and processing, supported by state-level licensing initiatives and industrial interest.

#### **Key stakeholders include:**

- i. Federal and state ministries regulating mining activities.
- ii. Nigerian Geological Survey Agency and National Minerals and Metals Mining Corporation.
- iii. Artisanal miners operating informally, often sanctioned locally but excluded nationally.
- iv. Private and multinational firms participating in industrial mining.
- v. Transnational networks facilitating smuggling.
- vi. Local communities affected by mining operations and environmental degradation.

These dynamics reflect a fragmented governance landscape, in which mining zones experience varied regulatory intensity and state support. Wealthy or politically connected actors benefit from legal frameworks, while marginalized groups are left to illegal extraction, reinforcing inequality and insecurity.

## **Statehood and the Double-Faced State**

In political theory the state is an entity that is characterized by sovereignty and defined territorial boundaries, and an institutional apparatus that is empowered to enforce rules and manage public affairs. Classic theorists such as Weber, Hobbes and Rousseau emphasize its monopoly on legitimate physical force within its territory and its role in ensuring security and public order (Angelov, 2024; Fukuyama, 2014). The Westphalian model, codified in the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and later in the Montevideo Convention (1933), formalized these elements: a permanent population, fixed borders, effective governance and the capacity for international relations foundations for international recognition and state legitimacy (Angelov, 2024; Montevideo Convention, 1933). Joel Migdal's concept of the state emphasizes that state strength is relational, measured by its ability to assert authority over society. In many post-colonial contexts, powerful social groups limit this authority, resulting in what Migdal terms "strong societies and weak states (Migdal, 2020).

While the state is expected to uniformly apply laws, Nigeria's divergent response to crude oil bunkering versus illegal mining illustrates selective enforcement; whereby laws are implemented differently based on political convenience. Bayart's "politics of the belly" illustrates this phenomenon: the predation by elites prioritizes personal gain over institutional integrity, leading to informal patron-client networks that penetrate state institutions (Bayart, 1993). The result is a dual governance structure legal and informal systems operating simultaneously, with the informal often corrupting the formal (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Nigeria exemplifies this selective enforcement. The Niger Delta experiences militarized operations against crude oil bunkering while illegal solid minerals mining despite its environmental and security risks, faces less scrutiny, suggesting a calculated strategy rather than oversight or incapacity.

Nigeria functions as a patrimonial state where political office is a source of personal rent. Elites control access not to institutions, but to networks of patronage, fueling corruption and institutional dysfunction (de Gramont, 2014). Bayart (1993) calls this context a "criminalization of the state," where violence and disorder are instrumentalized by elites to preserve their hold over resource flows. Chabal and Daloz (1999) describe this as the strategy of "disorder as a political instrument", where hybrid public-private networks thrive through the deliberate maintenance of chaos, enabling informal enclosures of power.

Complementing this is Frederick Cooper's notion of the "gatekeeper state" helps explain how Nigerian elites manage access to oil and mineral wealth. In this model, the postcolonial African state functions less as a sovereign governing body and more as a broker of access controlling entry points to economic and political resources for internal and external actors. The state deliberately regulates extraction in ways that sustain elite control and revenue capture, rather than building democratic accountability (Cooper, 2002).

In light of these, a double-faced state is one that applies rule enforcement strategically. It uses state coercion where resource control aligns with elite interests, but tolerates or even facilitates informal extraction when it covers hidden bargains or sustains patronage networks. This is evident in Nigeria's differential treatment of dry land vs. swamp-based resources and oil vs. minerals revealing not a technocratic governance failure, but politically motivated selectivity.

## **Resource Governance**

Resource governance in Nigeria is structured around a constellation of agencies, laws, and revenue-sharing mechanisms designed to manage extractive industries. At the federal level,

institutions such as the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL), the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority (NSIA) and the National Minerals and Metals Mining Corporation regulate oil and mining operations and steward revenues through centralized systems (Uwa & Osawe, 2023). Environmental oversight is divided between specialized bodies like NOSDRA for oil spills and the Infrastructure Concession Regulatory Commission for mining-related public-private partnerships. Despite this framework, multiple institutional overlaps, discretionary licensing, and inter-agency rivalry have fostered bureaucratic inefficiencies and opacity, undermining transparency and accountability in resource use.

Nigeria's federal structure complicates resource governance by centralizing control and revenue. Under the 1999 Constitution, oil and mineral rights belong to the federal government not the producing states allowing Abuja to collect royalties and distribute proceeds through statutory formulas that heavily favor central authority (Edet, 2018; Babalola & Okafor, 2019). This centralized model deters local investment in extraction industries, weakens state-level accountability, and amplifies hostility in regions like the Niger Delta, where demands for restructuring and true federalism have become entrenched (Edet, 2018; Okolo & Raymond, 2018). Failure to sufficiently differentiate revenue rights by region not only disincentivizes governors from promoting local sector development but also entrenches dependency and rent-seeking at the federal level.

The concept of state capture links intimately to this structural imbalance. Centralized licensing and revenue exercises have enabled patronage networks, wherein political elites and economic stakeholders influence permit allocations and revenue-sharing in their favor (Edet, 2018; Osawe & Uwa, 2023). Formal governance channels are bypassed or hollowed out, giving rise to informal, unregulated systems of extraction. In the oil sector, stringent enforcement of bunkering laws in the Niger Delta can be attributed less to environmental or economic necessity than to political control. In mining by contrast, weak oversight and permissive licensing allow illicit gold and gemstone operations to flourish offering an intriguing illustration of Nigeria's dualistic state model.

### **Environmental Justice and Selective Enforcement**

Environmental justice refers to the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income, in the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws and policies (Bullard, 2000). This principle in Nigeria has largely been violated in the management of extractive resources. The Niger Delta as a region of dense oil infrastructure bears the brunt of ecological devastation with limited state responsiveness, while mineral-rich states in the North experience lenient regulation despite rising environmental harm. This uneven enforcement pattern constitutes what scholars have termed "environmental racism," where policy and enforcement choices disproportionately harm marginalized or politically weaker groups (Pellow, 2007; Adebayo & Onuoha, 2021).

The environmental costs of oil extraction in the Niger Delta are well-documented: oil spills, gas flaring, and ecosystem collapse have decimated local livelihoods and health. Between 1976 and 2019, over 3 million barrels of oil were spilled in the region, often without adequate remediation or compensation (UNEP, 2011; NOSDRA, 2020). These harms are further exacerbated by the militarization of oil-producing communities under the guise of fighting bunkering, leading to human rights abuses and community displacements (Omotola, 2009; Idemudia, 2014). Meanwhile in states like Zamfara, Niger, and Kaduna, illegal gold and columbite mining contributes to deforestation, lead poisoning, and water pollution, yet attracts little federal scrutiny or environmental remediation efforts (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Olalekan et al., 2020).

This enforcement disparity reveals a troubling pattern of state behavior wherein ecological protection is not applied uniformly but is shaped by regional power dynamics and elite interests. In the case of the Niger Delta, the state responds aggressively because the region's oil represents a direct stream of federally controlled revenue. Any disruption whether by bunkering or agitation is swiftly repressed under the logic of "economic sabotage" (Watts, 2004). Informal mining in the North is often tolerated or even encouraged under the rhetoric of economic empowerment and poverty alleviation, despite its environmental and security consequences. As Akpan and Akpabio (2021) argue, this disparity reflects "an instrumentalist logic of state power where coercion and protection are distributed selectively based on the perceived threat to elite resource flows."

This asymmetry violates the core principles of environmental justice which demand equal protection under environmental law. The people of the Niger Delta despite living in one of the most polluted regions on earth receive fewer protections, less restitution and more repression than communities in other parts of the country. Environmental racism in this context is both structural and strategic: it is embedded in governance institutions and reproduced through uneven policy enforcement.

Regional disparities further intensify perceptions of injustice. While oil-producing states like Bayelsa and Rivers suffer from chronic underdevelopment and ecological decay, non-oil states benefit from federal allocations derived from oil revenues without bearing the associated costs. Some of these same non-oil states experience state-sanctioned leniency toward illegal mining, despite credible evidence that these activities fund banditry, exacerbate insecurity and cause localized environmental crises (GI-TOC, 2021; Ukoji & Ezeibe, 2020).

Environmental injustice in Nigeria in this sense cannot be separated from political ecology: the interplay of environmental degradation, resource control and power relations. Selective enforcement of environmental standards perpetuates ecological marginalization and reflects broader patterns of governance failure. As Obi (2010) notes, the Nigerian state's selective visibility omnipresent in regions with strategic economic value and absent in regions with diffuse or informal extractive activities fosters a two-tier system of environmental citizenship: one for the governed and one for the ignored.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design that is anchored in documentary and content analysis with secondary data drawn from scholarly publications, government reports, policy briefs and credible media investigations. Through employing a desk-based approach, the research critically examines Nigeria's dual enforcement of the extractive governance, contrasting the militarized repression of crude oil bunkering in the Niger Delta with the state's permissive stance toward solid minerals mining in the North. Sources were selected purposively to ensure relevance, reliability and verifiability, including peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports from institutions such as the Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the International Crisis Group, as well as investigative accounts from reputable news outlets. Data were thematically organized around core issues of environmental justice, elite capture, and regional disparities, and were analyzed through the theoretical lenses of political ecology neopatrimonialism and the resource curse. This methodological approach enables a rigorous and contextual interpretation of how selective enforcement in Nigeria's extractive sector reflects deeper patterns of governance, inequality, and state legitimacy.



## **Theoretical Framework**

Political ecology provides the most appropriate theoretical framework for interrogating Nigeria's double-faced approach to extractive governance. A theory Emerging in the 1970s within the fields of geography and anthropology, political ecology was first articulated through the works of Eric R. Wolf (1972) and later expanded by Piers Blaikie's seminal book *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (1985), which examined how environmental degradation is inseparable from political and economic structures. Blaikie and Harold Brookfield's *Land Degradation and Society* (1987) further consolidated the approach, establishing political ecology as a distinct analytical paradigm that critiques the apolitical narratives of environmental crises. Subsequent contributions by scholars such as Michael Watts (2000, 2004), Arturo Escobar (1996), and Paul Robbins (2012) enriched the framework, emphasizing themes of power, resistance, marginalization and environmental justice. Political ecology interrogates how power relations shape access to control over and degradation of natural resources, showing that environmental problems are not merely ecological or technical, but are deeply political and are tied to inequalities of class, ethnicity, and region. This makes political ecology highly applicable to this study, which examines why the Nigerian state responds to crude oil bunkering in the Niger Delta with militarized repression, while approaching illegal solid minerals mining in the North and Middle Belt with tolerance and complicity. The framework illuminates how selective enforcement reflects broader patterns of elite capture, neopatrimonial governance and the creation of "sacrifice zones" where marginalized communities bear disproportionate environmental and social costs.

## **The Political Economy of Crude Oil Bunkering**

Crude oil bunkering in Nigeria is far more than isolated criminality it is embedded in the region's history of exploitation, resistance, and systemic neglect. The modern oil economy, beginning in the late 1950s, devastated traditional livelihoods through oil spills and pollution, precipitating waves of resistance. Early insurgencies like Isaac Adaka Boro's 1966 declaration of a Niger Delta republic, and later movements like MOSOP led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, highlighted environmental injustice long before militant bunkering emerged (Olaniyan, 2017).

Oil theft had evolved into an organized underground economy by the late 1990s, and it was sustained by local communities who viewed bunkering as a form of "getting their dues" and a survival strategy amid severe poverty and government neglect. The rise of militant groups like MEND and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) combined political uprising with black-market syndicates. These groups often attacked production facilities, kidnapped staff and siphoned oil recasting the issue as not only criminal but also deeply political. The 2009 amnesty program integrated militants into civilian life and granted some security contracts. However it failed to dismantle bunkering networks, which persisted into cycles of illicit enrichment and resistance (Brook, 2013).



Plate : Photo of DIY Oil Refining in the Niger Delta Source: <https://www.wired.com/2013/08/samuel-james/>

Crude oil bunkering in the Niger Delta is driven by a political economy of patronage and complicity. Evidence shows involvement from multiple actors:

- i. Security forces (Army, Navy, Police, and JTF): often serve as armed escorts, receive protection payments and provide intelligence to bunkerers. Reports indicate that postings in the Delta are highly coveted due to the personal profit opportunities (U.S. Department of State, 2009).
- ii. Politicians and elites: control access to pipelines and territory serve as financiers and sanction bunkering operations for political and personal gain.
- iii. Oil industry insiders: technical know-how from multinational or Nigerian oil staff enables high-volume theft and evasion of detection (Megwai, 2024).
- iv. Local networks: including militant groups, bargemen, refiners, and village-based youths who facilitate local extraction, refining, and distribution often seeing bunkering as both survival strategy and funding source for local resistance (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Thus, bunkering operates within an illicit value chain whose success relies on overlapping alliances between state actors, elite financiers, technical facilitators and disenfranchised communities. The state's response to oil theft has been heavily militarized and securitized. Operations led by the Joint Task Force (JTF) have frequently resulted in raids on bunkering sites, arrests, destruction of illegal refineries, and interjections by security forces many with questionable legality. For example, in 2024 alone the Nigerian Army destroyed 27 illegal refining sites and seized approximately 100,000 liters of stolen oil (Eboh, 2024).



Plate : A picture of troops destroying illicitly refined petroleum products.

Source: <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/troops-destroy-illegally-refined-petroleum-products>

Yet surveillance and military presence often serve dual functions: while ostensibly cracking down on criminality, they also facilitate cover for protected bunkering activities and allow for personal profiteering by military insiders. Investigations have revealed that security units not only coordinate but profit from the illegal oil trade. Measures like Nigeriana oil surveillance and pipeline mapping have increased yet remain insufficient without institutional clarity and political will.

The consequences of oil bunkering for the environment and local livelihoods are catastrophic. The Niger Delta has experienced more than 546 million gallons of oil spills over five decades, devastates soil, waterways and mangrove ecosystems and disrupts agriculture and fishing, the backbone of local economies (Brook, 2013). Beyond ecosystem damage, repeated raids, bunkering fires and pipeline explosions expose residents to health risks, respiratory infections and water-borne diseases.



Plate : Photo of environment and local livelihoods at a catastrophic state due to oil spills.

Source: <https://www.wired.com/2013/08/samuel-james/>

Despite the environmental and economic toll, affected communities remain locked in cycles of vulnerability. Local participants in bunkering may gain immediate income, but these activities compromise long-term livelihoods. The state's reliance on coercion rather than community-driven solutions undermines trust and heightens conflict. The political economy of oil bunkering reveals a dual economy where illicit extraction operates outside formal oversight yet is sustained by networks that span the local to the elite. Militarization serves not just to suppress but to govern the illicit economy, preserving resource flows for stakeholders in government and private sectors. Meanwhile environmental degradation continues unabated, reinforcing cycles of resistance and economic desperation. Crude oil bunkering has become a structural feature of Nigeria's political economy, reflecting broader patterns of state predation, inequality and systemic corruption.

### **Governance and the "Soft Touch" on Solid Minerals**

Governance of Nigeria's solid minerals sector presents a sharp contrast to the state's aggressive posture toward oil bunkering. Rather than imposing strict regulatory oversight, the government has adopted a deliberate hands-off approach, shaped by a combination of informal economic forces, foreign actors, and elite collusion, underwritten by federal-centralism and political caution.



At the grassroots level, artisanal and small-scale miners (ASM) dominate the extraction landscape, operating outside formal regulatory frameworks. These miners often working under precarious conditions, supply gold, lithium, and columbite using primitive methods and little safety measures. Child labor remains widespread six-year-olds working in dust-filled pits in Nasarawa is one stark example underscoring the critical vulnerability of these communities (Adebayo, 2024). ASM thus fills an economic void, offering minimal subsistence but little security or legal recognition.



Plate : Children Mining Lithium in Northern Nigeria

Source: <https://radionigeria.gov.ng/2025/05/19/andhttps://www.euronews.com/green/2024/12/13/>

Complicating this landscape are foreign actors, notably Chinese nationals and companies. Numerous arrests have been recorded 27 Chinese in Osun (2020), two in Kwara (2025), and 13 more in 2023 highlighting a pattern of cross-border interest and complicity (Oyewale, 2025). A Dataphyte investigation further reveals deep political implications, noting that “policy deficiencies, corruption and political interests” enable these foreign interests to thrive despite bans or suspended licenses. In Nasarawa, Chinese companies were seen purchasing lithium without verifying its source or extraction conditions demonstrating a market economy that favors profit over compliance (Adebayo, 2024).

Meanwhile elite patronage and local syndicates facilitate a permissive environment. Community Development Agreements (CDAs) between mining firms and local chiefs often operate outside statutory frameworks, benefiting elites while bypassing broader community interests. In Ebonyi’s Ezillo and Ikwo, investigations revealed selective compensation schemes and systemic exclusion of ordinary villagers (Vanguard News, 2025). These backroom deals are a salient expression of informal governance, where access and control are brokered through local hierarchies rather than transparent legal mechanisms.

This permissive model is reinforced by regulatory under-investment. The Ministry of Mines lacks adequate staffing and logistical support at sub-national levels, one vehicle for four state officers in expansive mining zones like Niger and Zamfara illustrates gross under-resourcing (Natsa, 2024). While the federal Minerals and Mining Act (1999) exists, enforcement is

inconsistent. Ministries and agencies like NESREA remain underfunded, oversight is lax and licensing processes are frequently opaque (Natsa, 2024).

Compounding this regulatory deficiency is the state's strategic economic rationale. Federal reforms such as requiring local processing of minerals to qualify for licenses are framed as diversification goals, not enforcement tools. In Zamfara, the lifting of a mining ban followed a purported improvement in security, rather than environmental remediation, signaling a governance approach driven by investor confidence and political expediency (Anyagwu, 2024). At the regional level, political sensitivities shape enforcement. Northern mining regions Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger are entangled with banditry and militancy. Yet rather than being militarized like the Niger Delta's oil sites, illegal mining in these regions is often tolerated or only intermittently policed. When crackdowns occur, they echo the reactive rather than preventative nature of enforcement, reinforcing distrust among local actors but avoiding wider intervention that could disrupt elite patronage chains.

This is not a crisis of capacity but of intentional governance design. The state's "soft touch" in solid minerals reflects a calculated tolerance designed to preserve elite networks, attract capital (even illicitly sourced), and maintain social order. Rather than enforcing uniform regulation, the Nigerian state enables parallel economies one criminalized (oil bunkering), the other informal but tolerated (mining). This dual strategy encapsulates the "double-faced" nature you're exploring: selective enforcement as political calculation rather than policy failure.

### **Uneven Enforcement and Regional Politics**

Nigeria's extraction governance is emblematic of a state that applies uneven enforcement a pattern influenced heavily by regional, ethnic, and political considerations. Comparing interventions in Niger Delta oil versus Northern mining reveals stark policy divergences shaped by strategic priorities rather than legal consistency or environmental urgency.

The Niger Delta, Nigeria's oil epicenter, has endured successive waves of militarization under the guise of countering "economic sabotage." Federal efforts like the Joint Task Force (JTF) and Operation Delta Safe have aggressively targeted bunkering sites, relying on military force, arrests, and destruction of illegal refineries. Between 2015 and 2023, JTF operations resulted in thousands of arrests and over 500 refined site demolitions (Osaghae & Onuoha, 2023). This state violence is not merely law enforcement it is a political tool aimed at controlling dissent, protecting oil revenues, and projecting power in a region historically resistant to federal control (Watts, 2007).

Conversely, Northern Nigeria presents a softened, tolerant response, even as illicit mining fuels environmental disasters and insecurity. In Zamfara State recently known for its ties to banditry the federal government lifted a state-wide mining ban in late 2024 not because of environmental remediation, but due to purported improvements in security (Reuters, 2024). Enforcement remains superficial: occasional raids or confiscations, but no sustained military deployment or permanent dismantling of illegal operations. This contrast with the Niger Delta suggests that responses are selective and political, rather than grounded in legal consistency.

Ethnicity, religion, and regionalism play critical roles in shaping enforcement. The Niger Delta is perceived as politically and ethnically distinct from dominant Northern and central elites; prolonged resistance there has been met with suspicion and suspicion drives force. Northern mining zones, by contrast, are often dominated by Hausa-Fulani ethnic majorities and Muslim communities. Their extractive activities are sometimes framed as community livelihood or

modern economic development, making federal crackdowns politically delicate. Illicit gold extraction thus receives muted institutional reaction, while similar acts in the Delta trigger immediate securitizing responses (Akpan & Akpabio, 2021). State narratives and framing reinforce these asymmetric responses. In the Delta, the government frames bunkering as betrayal and sabotage, evoking national security discourses and criminal law. Media coverage echoes these themes, prioritizing imagery of oil spills and militant violence to justify military intervention (Adekoya, 2022). Meanwhile, coverage of illicit mining often emphasizes poverty and marginal livelihoods minimized as survival-driven acts rather than security threats. This framing relabels potential environmental collapse or insurgent-funding channels as manageable social issues, rather than urgency-demanding crises.

These disparate enforcement paradigms undermine environmental justice and political equity. The state's deployment of violence in the South juxtaposed to pacification in the North signals that resource governance far from being neutral is a vehicle of regional power dynamics. This selective state approach erodes public confidence in federal institutions and deepens national disunity.

### **Elite Capture and Institutional Hypocrisy**

Nigeria's governance of extractive sectors reveals a pattern of elite capture, where entrenched political and economic actors craft policies that benefit themselves rather than the public. This is not dysfunctional governance it is strategic, deliberate, and rooted in a tradition of neopatrimonialism and the shadow state, characterized by personal rule, patronage, and selective institutional manipulation.

Powerful actors from federal ministers and state governors to military commanders and business tycoons derive benefit from both oil bunkering and illegal mining. In the Delta, security personnel or politically connected military contractors profit by "facilitating" bunkering operations and turning a blind eye in exchange for payoffs, or by purchasing stolen crude themselves (Chatham House, 2013; Osaghae & Onuoha, 2023). Simultaneously, gold and lithium extraction in northern and middle-belt states has created parallel profit systems. Politicians grant informal mining leases to patronage networks, enriching themselves and maintaining support through local development tokens (Edet & Okafor, 2019; Uwa & Osawe, 2023). This dual entrenchment reveals that for many elites, state regulation is less a tool than a conduit for wealth accumulation.

Regulatory failures in both sectors are therefore strategic and not accidental. In oil, selective enforcement and militarized crackdowns serve mostly as performance politics, they justify claim to control, attract international investors and affirm authority, while systematic corruption continues. In mining, the lack of enforcement is a conscious policy choice: weak institutions, opaque licensing, and unfunded oversight create fertile ground for elite misuse of influence (Obaje, 2009; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Rather than signaling incompetence, this is institutional hypocrisy laws exist but are wielded only where politically convenient, especially when enforcement serves power consolidation.

The state's approach to criminalization and economic opportunism further mirrors this hypocrisy. Crude oil bunkers are publicly condemned as saboteurs, yet military units complicit in theft are rarely prosecuted. Banning mining in Zamfara after a major gold fraud would draw inevitable criticism, yet the ban lifted once elites secured gains under the risk-free guise of "improved security" the prevention of illicit action was never sincerely pursued (Reuters, 2024).

This suggests that criminality is selectively constructed; legality is defined not by objective justice but by whether it disrupts elite revenue channels.

From the standpoint of neopatrimonial theory (Bayart, 1993) and Migdal's notion of the shadow state, Nigeria's governance oscillates between formal rules and informal social networks. Formally, institutions like NNPC or the Minerals Ministry operate under codified regulations; informally, however, actual enforcement and revenue distribution bypass these frameworks entirely. This shadow state logic where implementation hinges on personal loyalty, not citizenship or legal merit is evident in both extractive economies. Elites routinely exploit dual regimes: appearing to uphold law publicly while privately manipulating them for economic gain. Elite capture and institutional hypocrisy are not incidental they are central to how Nigeria's extractive state functions. Regulatory frameworks exist more as symbolic authority tools, while the real engine of wealth and power lies outside institutional bounds. Understanding Nigeria's extractive politics thus requires seeing the state not as a neutral actor but as a gatekeeper of privilege, navigating formal legality to serve informal elite networks.

### **Implications for Environmental and Social Justice**

The divergent enforcement regimes governing oil and solid-mineral extraction perpetuate a stark geography of sacrifice in Nigeria. In the Niger Delta, recurring spills, gas flaring, and militarized crackdowns have rendered mangrove swamps toxic and farmland infertile, exposing fishing and farming communities to chronic poverty and health crises (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2011). Yet those same communities already marginalized by distance from federal power, face aggressive policing rather than restorative action. Further north, artisanal gold and lithium mining has produced an equally dire though less publicized pattern of heavy-metal contamination and child labor; the 2010 Zamfara lead-poisoning disaster, which killed hundreds of children, underscores the human cost of regulatory neglect (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Because the state responds decisively to oil sabotage but tolerates illicit mining, both regions experience environmental injustice, albeit in different registers: violent repression in the Delta and negligent abandonment in mining zones.

These conditions have profound social consequences, especially for youth. In the Delta, limited livelihood options and militarized policing have pushed young people toward bunkering networks or militant groups, sustaining a cycle of confrontation with the state (Watts, 2007). In the North and Middle Belt, the informal mineral economy absorbs unemployed youths into dangerous pits and smuggling chains, where earnings are precarious and violence by bandit gangs is endemic (International Crisis Group, 2020). Such pathways normalize illegality as economic strategy, eroding the social contract and embedding insecurity within Nigeria's political economy.

Uneven enforcement also corrodes national unity and the legitimacy of state authority. Communities observe that environmental crimes in one region trigger soldiers and gunboats, while similar or worse offenses elsewhere prompt little more than rhetorical concern. This differential treatment reinforces perceptions that federal power serves sectional interests, deepening the cleavage between "oil South" and "mineral North." As Obi (2010) argues, selective governance fosters a hierarchy of citizenship in which some ecologies and by extension, their inhabitants are deemed expendable.

Such inequities over time threaten the cohesion of the federal system itself. Where communities conclude that legal channels cannot secure remediation or fair revenue sharing, trust in Abuja's institutions declines, fueling agitation for resource control, secessionist rhetoric and in extreme cases, armed resistance. The longer environmental liabilities accumulate without equitable

redress, the greater the fiscal burden of clean-up and the harder it becomes to rebuild credibility. If left unaddressed, today's selective enforcement could crystallize into enduring regional grievances that outlive the current political class, undermining Nigeria's prospects for stable, inclusive development.

## **Conclusion**

This article has traced how Nigeria's governance of crude-oil and solid-mineral extraction exposes a profound contradiction at the heart of the state. A militarised "war" on bunkering in the Niger Delta co-exists with permissive, often complicit, attitudes toward illicit mining in the North and Middle Belt. Through the lenses of resource-curse framework, neopatrimonialism and political ecology theory, we have shown that this disparity is not a technical failure but a politically calculated pattern of selective enforcement. Elite networks in Abuja and the regions exploit parallel economies, deploying coercion where oil revenues are threatened and tolerating informality where mineral rents bolster local patronage. The result is environmental devastation in multiple geographies, deepening youth precarity, and a widening legitimacy gap between citizens and the federal centre.

Dual standards in extractive governance carry systemic risks. They perpetuate environmental racism, turning the Niger Delta and northern mining belts into sacrifice zones; they incentivise criminal entrepreneurship by signalling that illegality is negotiable; and they erode the credibility of state authority, fostering regionally framed grievances that jeopardise national cohesion. This asymmetry will entrench distrust in federal institutions, fuel separatist rhetoric and inflate the long-term social and ecological costs of remediation.

Nigeria therefore needs an integrated equity-driven approach to its extractive industries. Firstly, constitutional and fiscal reforms should narrow the gap between resource origin and benefit, pairing decentralised revenue-sharing with robust federal oversight. Then secondly, regulatory agencies NOSDRA, the Mines Inspectorate, state environmental ministries must be insulated from political interference, adequately funded, and mandated to enforce uniform standards across sectors and regions. Thirdly, transparency is critical: full public disclosure of licensing, production, and remediation data, audited by independent bodies, would reduce the shadow space where patronage thrives. Fourth is environmental justice requires dedicated clean-up funds for the Delta and for contaminated mining communities, alongside legally enforceable community-development agreements that move beyond tokenistic benefits. Then lastly accountability mechanisms specialised courts, whistle-blower protections and international supply-chain due diligence must ensure that military officers, politicians and foreign firms complicit in extractive crimes face real sanctions.

Ending Nigeria's double-faced stance demands a shift from coercive, regionally skewed interventions to a coherent governance architecture that is rooted in transparency, inclusive decision-making and environmental restitution. Only by aligning enforcement with principles of equity and accountability can the state rebuild trust, stem the tide of illicit extraction, and unlock its vast natural wealth for sustainable, nationwide development.

## **Recommendations**

To address the entrenched disparities in Nigeria's extractive governance and move toward a more equitable, accountable and sustainable management of natural resources, the following policy and structural reforms are recommended:



1. **Constitutional and Fiscal Restructuring for Resource Justice:** There is an urgent need to revisit the constitutional provisions that centralize resource ownership and revenue allocation. A restructured federal arrangement that allows resource-producing states greater control and equity in revenue sharing will not only reduce the incentives for illegal extraction but also foster a sense of ownership, responsibility, and accountability in resource management. This restructuring should be accompanied by legal frameworks that ensure equitable redistribution across regions and safeguard national unity.
2. **Uniform and Regionally Balanced Enforcement of Environmental Laws:** The Nigerian state must end its selective application of environmental and extractive regulations. Enforcement should be standardized across both oil-producing and mineral-rich regions to avoid the perception and reality of environmental racism. Agencies such as NOSDRA and NESREA must be empowered, better resourced, and held to enforce strict compliance regardless of geography, ethnicity, or political sensitivity.
3. **Insulation of Regulatory Institutions from Political Interference:** Independent and well-funded regulatory agencies are essential. Regulatory bodies in both oil and solid minerals sectors must be shielded from elite influence and corruption. Appointments to leadership positions should be merit-based, and oversight mechanisms should include civil society actors, technical experts, and representatives from impacted communities to ensure accountability and transparency.
4. **Transparency and Public Disclosure of Extractive Industry Operations:** Nigeria should implement full transparency in licensing, production volumes, revenue flows, and environmental impact assessments. Public access to extractive data through platforms such as the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) should be made mandatory and updated regularly. International partnerships and donor support should be tied to measurable improvements in extractive transparency.
5. **Accountability for State and Non-State Actors in Illicit Extraction:** The impunity surrounding both oil bunkering and illegal mining must end. Military personnel, politicians, foreign companies, and local elites involved in these shadow economies must be investigated, prosecuted, and punished through robust legal mechanisms. Special tribunals or extractive-sector task forces may be needed to dismantle entrenched patronage networks.
6. **Community-Based Environmental Remediation and Benefit Sharing:** The federal government, in partnership with states and extractive companies, must implement legally binding Community Development Agreements (CDAs) that provide fair compensation, development projects, and environmental remediation. Priority should be given to the Niger Delta and contaminated mining areas like Zamfara, Nasarawa, and Ebonyi, ensuring communities most affected by extraction receive targeted restoration and support.
7. **Youth Empowerment and Alternative Livelihoods Programs:** Given the role of youth in both bunkering and illegal mining, comprehensive livelihood programs must be designed to provide alternatives. These should include vocational training, entrepreneurship grants, and local employment quotas in licensed extractive operations. Such efforts should be embedded within broader rural development and security strategies to break cycles of desperation and violence.
8. **Implementation of International Standards and Due Diligence:** Nigeria should domesticate and enforce international frameworks such as the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Mineral Supply Chains and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. These standards can help hold multinational companies and their local affiliates accountable for unethical practices, particularly in informal mining zones.

9. **Strengthening Inter-Agency Collaboration and Intelligence Sharing:** Coordination among law enforcement, intelligence, environmental, and extractive regulatory agencies is critical. A centralized extractive sector monitoring body with the authority to coordinate and enforce cross-sectoral compliance will improve institutional coherence and reduce overlaps, sabotage, and regulatory capture.
10. **Long-Term National Strategy for Resource-Based Development:** Nigeria must develop a coherent, long-term national strategy that prioritizes sustainable and inclusive development from extractive resources. This should include strategic investment of oil and mining revenues in renewable energy, infrastructure, education, and health shifting from a rentier economy to a productive, people-centered economy.

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