

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE AND TRADITIONAL KINGSHIP CRISIS IN TAKUM LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF TARABA STATE

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ABSTRACT

The institution of traditional kingship in Nigeria has historically served as a critical pillar of community governance, social cohesion, and cultural identity. In post-colonial northern Nigerian states, however, the constitutional repositioning of traditional rulers as non-governmental actors has created conditions in which chieftaincy institutions are simultaneously more vulnerable to political interference and less legally protected from executive pressure. This study investigates the nature, mechanisms, and consequences of political interference in traditional kingship in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State. Using a qualitative case study design anchored in 24 in-depth interviews with traditional rulers, community leaders, politicians, civil society actors, and state officials, the study identifies four primary mechanisms of political interference: partisan manipulation of chieftaincy appointment processes; strategic use of de-recognition powers by the executive; instrumentalisation of inter-dynastic disputes for electoral mobilisation; and judicial obstruction in chieftaincy litigation. The findings reveal that political interference has produced a self-reinforcing legitimacy crisis in which traditional rulers are perceived as political appointees rather than community leaders. This erodes the conflict mediation capacity of traditional institutions at a moment when Taraba State faces acute security and development challenges. The paper argues for structural reforms that separate chieftaincy from partisan politics while preserving the constitutional roles of traditional institutions in community governance.

Keywords: political interference, traditional kingship, chieftaincy crisis, democratic governance, ethnic politics, communal conflict

Introduction

The relationship between political power and traditional authority in Nigeria is one of the most enduring and consequential tensions in the country's governance architecture. From the British colonial policy of indirect rule — which used traditional rulers as agents of colonial administration — through post-independence arrangements that variously elevated and marginalised traditional institutions, to the present democratic dispensation in which traditional rulers occupy an ambiguous constitutional position, the institution of traditional rulership has never been fully autonomous from the political order in which it is embedded (Nweke, 2022; Abubakar, 2020).

This tension is particularly acute in multi-ethnic northern Nigerian states like Taraba, where the density and complexity of traditional authority structures reflect a state with over 100 distinct ethnic groups. That ethnic diversity creates both a profound need for effective traditional governance and a multiplicity of chieftaincy competition that political actors can exploit for electoral advantage. Taraba State, created in 1991 from the former Gongola State, has experienced persistent inter-ethnic tensions, recurrent communal conflicts, and intense competition for both political and traditional authority — dynamics that have made chieftaincy disputes serve as accelerants to political volatility (Ibrahim & Danladi, 2024; Aliyu & Suleiman, 2023).

Takum Local Government Area sits at the heart of these challenges. Located in Taraba's Southern Senatorial District, Takum is among the state's most ethnically diverse LGAs — encompassing major groups including the Kuteb, Jukun, Tiv, Chamba, Fulani, and Hausa. It has one of the most complex traditional authority landscapes in the state, with multiple first-class chieftaincy stools and a deeply contested hierarchy of traditional rulership. The Ukwe chieftaincy of Takum — the most senior traditional stool in the LGA — has been at the centre of successive chieftaincy disputes since the 1990s, each involving significant political manipulation of the selection and recognition process (Orkar, 2023; Danladi, 2022).

Existing scholarship on traditional institutions in Nigeria (Adekunle, 2015; Nweke, 2022; Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2022) has established the broad contours of chieftaincy politicisation but leaves two significant gaps. Most existing studies examine traditional institutions at the state or national level, without the granular, community-level analysis needed to identify specific mechanisms of political interference. Furthermore, the post-2019 acceleration of chieftaincy disputes in Taraba State has not been adequately captured in the existing literature.

This study addresses both gaps through a single-case qualitative investigation of political interference in traditional kingship in Takum LGA between 2015 and 2025. The central argument is that political interference in Takum is not an occasional aberration but a systematic, structurally embedded feature of the LGA's political economy — sustained by rational incentives of political actors who find chieftaincy influence valuable for ethnic mobilisation and electoral competition, and by the weak legal framework governing chieftaincy appointments. The consequences — a delegitimised traditional institution, a fractured community, and a paralysed conflict-mediation capacity — impose measurable costs on the governance and security of Takum LGA.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the statement of the problem, objectives, and research questions. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature. Section 4 presents the theoretical framework. Section 5 describes the research methodology. Section 6 presents the empirical findings. Section 7 provides an analytical discussion. Section 8 concludes with policy recommendations.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the constitutional recognition of traditional institutions in Nigerian governance, the mechanisms through which political actors interfere in chieftaincy processes

— and the governance consequences of such interference — remain inadequately documented at the community level. In Takum LGA, successive gubernatorial elections since 2015 have been accompanied by contested chieftaincy appointments, derecognitions, and lengthy litigation. These events have been directly associated with communal violence resulting in over 40 deaths and approximately 2,800 displaced persons between 2021 and 2023 (Taraba State Emergency Management Agency [SEMA], 2023).

The central problem is that the Governor's discretionary power to recognise and derecognise traditional rulers — without binding procedural constraints — creates a structural opening for partisan political influence over chieftaincy decisions. When this power is exercised through partisan patronage networks rather than customary criteria, the resulting traditional rulers lack community legitimacy, cannot perform conflict mediation, and become targets of political contestation rather than resources for governance. This study investigates the specific mechanisms through which this problem operates in Takum LGA and the governance consequences that follow.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the mechanisms and governance consequences of political interference in traditional kingship in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State between 2015 and 2025.

The specific objectives are:

1. To identify and document the primary mechanisms through which political actors interfere in traditional kingship processes in Takum LGA.
2. To examine the consequences of political interference for the legitimacy and governance capacity of traditional institutions in Takum LGA.
3. To analyse the relationship between chieftaincy disputes and communal violence in Takum LGA between 2015 and 2025.
4. To evaluate the adequacy of the legal and regulatory framework governing chieftaincy appointments in Taraba State.
5. To propose evidence-based policy reforms that would reduce political interference in chieftaincy governance in northern Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary mechanisms through which political actors interfere in traditional kingship processes in Takum LGA?
2. What are the consequences of political interference for the legitimacy and governance capacity of traditional institutions in Takum LGA?
3. What is the relationship between chieftaincy disputes and communal violence in Takum LGA during the period 2015–2025?
4. How adequate is the legal and regulatory framework governing chieftaincy appointments in Taraba State?
5. What structural reforms would most effectively reduce political interference in traditional kingship in northern Nigeria?

Literature Review

1 Traditional Institutions in Nigeria — Constitutional Position and Historical Evolution

Traditional rulership in Nigeria predates British colonialism by centuries. Crowder (1968) described these as 'indigenous administrative systems' that served as the primary mechanisms of political organisation, conflict resolution, and social control across diverse pre-colonial communities. The British policy of indirect rule — most fully developed in the emirate areas of northern Nigeria — preserved and amplified traditional authority structures by incorporating native rulers as administrative agents of the colonial state (Olonisakin, 2021; Nweke, 2022).

Post-independence constitutional arrangements progressively marginalised traditional rulers from formal governmental authority, particularly after military governments abolished Houses of Chiefs in most states. The 1999 Constitution makes no provision for traditional rulers in the formal governmental structure, yet simultaneously makes their existence dependent on state legislation (Nweke, 2022; Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2022). This constitutional ambiguity creates the structural opening through which political interference operates.

Critically, scholars diverge on how to interpret this ambiguity. Nweke (2022) argues that the constitutional silence is a resource for traditional institutions — allowing them flexibility to adapt to democratic contexts without being bound by bureaucratic constraints. Adekunle (2015), by contrast, argues that the same ambiguity is primarily a vulnerability — one that state governments have consistently exploited to subordinate traditional authority to partisan interests. The Takum evidence, as this study demonstrates, supports Adekunle's more pessimistic reading: in contexts of intense electoral competition and weak rule of law, ambiguity is captured by the stronger party, which is typically the executive.

The Taraba State Chieftaincy Law (Cap. 28, Laws of Taraba State, 2010) vests the Governor with the power to recognise, derecognise, and regulate chieftaincy stools. The law establishes a Chieftaincy and Community Affairs Committee as an advisory body, but its recommendations are not binding — preserving full executive discretion over chieftaincy decisions (Danladi, 2022; Ibrahim & Bakwai, 2024).

2 Political Interference in Chieftaincy — Mechanisms and Patterns

Abubakar (2020) categorises political interference mechanisms as: appointment interference; tenure manipulation; institutional reconfiguration; and judicial manipulation. These mechanisms are frequently deployed in combination, creating a comprehensive political grip on traditional authority. This typology provides a useful organising framework, though it was developed from state-level analysis and requires refinement for community-level application.

Adekunle (2015) provides the foundational analysis of the political economy of chieftaincy interference, arguing that traditional rulership has been systematically converted from a mechanism of community governance into an instrument of political patronage and ethnic mobilisation. While influential, Adekunle's analysis predates the post-2015 intensification of chieftaincy politicisation associated with competitive gubernatorial elections in states like Taraba. More recent scholarship suggests the dynamics he describes have accelerated rather than diminished (Nweke, 2022; Aliyu & Suleiman, 2023).

Nweke (2022) found a significant correlation between gubernatorial elections and chieftaincy disputes in ten northern states — with chieftaincy appointment activity clustering around election years at a rate 2.8 times higher than non-election years. This correlation is compelling, but Nweke does not explain the mechanism connecting elections to chieftaincy decisions at the community level. The present study fills this gap by documenting the specific patronage transactions, political meetings, and financial arrangements through which the electoral cycle translates into chieftaincy interference.

Aliyu and Suleiman (2023) documented a wave of chieftaincy disputes following the 2019 and 2023 Taraba gubernatorial elections, attributing them to incoming administrations seeking to install politically aligned traditional rulers in strategic communities. Their study, though limited to Taraba, confirms the election-chieftaincy interference nexus and provides essential contextual background for the present study's Takum findings.

3 Traditional Institutions and Community Governance

Ojukwu and Olaifa (2022) conducted a comprehensive assessment of traditional institution effectiveness in Nigerian community governance, finding that functional traditional institutions served as effective first-response conflict resolution mechanisms, facilitated local development project identification, and maintained social cohesion where

formal state governance was weak. Their analysis of governance effectiveness rests on the assumption that traditional rulers possess sufficient legitimacy to function as neutral mediators — an assumption that the Takum case radically challenges.

What Ojukwu and Olaifa (2022) do not adequately theorise is the vulnerability of traditional institutions to the very political forces they might otherwise mediate. Their optimistic assessment of traditional institution governance value implicitly treats legitimacy as a stable endowment. The Takum evidence suggests instead that legitimacy is a contested and reversible resource — one that can be destroyed by political interference faster than it can be rebuilt. This limitation is important: prescribing stronger traditional institutions as governance resources without addressing the political conditions that undermine their legitimacy risks producing policy recommendations that strengthen the form of traditional authority while leaving intact the political dynamics that hollow it out.

4 Chieftaincy Disputes and Communal Violence

Orkar (2023) examined 34 chieftaincy-linked violent conflicts in north-central and north-eastern Nigeria between 2015 and 2022 and found that chieftaincy disputes were a precipitating factor in 71% of cases — more commonly than land disputes (58%), religious tensions (44%), or farmer-herder conflicts (52%). The causal pathway operates through multiple channels: contested chieftaincy creates rival factions that mobilise ethnically; it delegitimises conflict mediation mechanisms that depend on traditional authority; and it creates political opportunities for opportunistic violence.

Orkar's (2023) quantitative evidence is important but does not explain the mechanism linking chieftaincy disputes specifically to politically motivated violence, as distinct from violence triggered by historical ethnic grievances. The present study contributes to this debate by showing that it is not merely the fact of a chieftaincy dispute that produces violence — it is the specific act of political interference (a recognition letter, a derecognition, an installation ceremony) that serves as the proximate trigger for organised communal violence in Takum.

In Takum LGA, the 2021–2023 chieftaincy dispute over the Ukwe stool was directly associated with three episodes of inter-community violence — in September 2021, March 2022, and October 2023 — that produced over 40 deaths and the displacement of approximately 2,800 persons (Taraba SEMA, 2023; Ibrahim & Danladi, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Neo-Patrimonialism and Traditional Authority

This study is theoretically anchored in neo-patrimonialism theory — specifically its application to the relationship between formal institutional power and informal political networks in sub-Saharan African governance contexts. Neo-patrimonialism, developed by Eisenstadt (1973) and subsequently applied to African governance by Bratton and Van de Walle (1997) and elaborated by Erdmann and Engel (2007), describes a political order in which formal bureaucratic-legal institutions coexist with and are systematically penetrated by informal personal networks, clientelism, and patrimonial authority.

Applied to the chieftaincy-politics interface in Takum, neo-patrimonialism provides a compelling explanatory framework. The formal chieftaincy law prescribes appointment processes based on customary law, lineage, and community selection. In practice, the Governor's recognition power is deployed through informal patronage networks, factional deals, and personal political calculations. The legal form is maintained while the substantive content is determined by patronage politics — precisely the neo-patrimonial hybrid that Erdmann and Engel (2007, p. 105) describe as 'the simultaneous existence of two coexisting, partly overlapping, partly contradictory logics of action.'

One limitation of the neo-patrimonial framework, as applied here, is that it tends to emphasise elite-level political dynamics at the expense of community agency. The Takum evidence shows that communities are not passive objects of political manipulation — they

resist, negotiate, and sometimes reject politically appointed rulers, as shown by the community's refusal to participate in the October 2023 peace talks under the politically installed Ukwe. Integrating neo-patrimonialism with legitimacy theory, as this study does, addresses this limitation.

2 Legitimacy Theory

The second theoretical lens is Weberian legitimacy theory (Weber, 1922; Beetham, 1991; Norris, 2012). Weber's tripartite classification of authority — traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal — provides a framework for understanding the specific vulnerability of traditional rulers to political interference. When a political actor uses rational-legal instruments (a Governor's recognition letter, a court order) to determine who occupies a traditional throne, the result is a holder whose rational-legal appointment contradicts their claimed traditional legitimacy — producing the legitimacy deficit that is the defining characteristic of politically manufactured chieftaincy crises.

Beetham's (1991) empirical theory of legitimacy — which argues that legitimate power requires conformity to established rules, justification of those rules by shared beliefs, and expressed consent of the governed — provides the analytical tools for understanding why political appointment of traditional rulers produces governance crises: such appointments violate all three conditions simultaneously. Norris (2012) extends this analysis to democratic contexts by showing that legitimacy is not inherited from institutional position but must be earned through performance and procedural fairness — an insight that applies directly to the Takum case, where a ruler's title provides no governance capacity without community acceptance.

3 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2022) provides the structural framework for understanding how formal and informal institutional rules interact to produce chieftaincy crises. North's distinction between formal institutions (written rules, laws) and informal institutions (norms, conventions, customary practices) is directly applicable: chieftaincy governance is regulated by both formal state law and informal customary norms, and political interference characteristically exploits the gap between them. Helmke and Levitsky's (2022) typology enables characterisation of the relationship between formal chieftaincy law and informal customary selection processes as 'competing' institutions — a configuration the authors identify as particularly destabilising, generating persistent institutional conflict and legitimacy contests.

Research Methodology

1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive case study design. The case study approach was selected for three reasons: the study seeks to understand the processes and mechanisms of political interference — questions requiring contextual depth rather than statistical generalisation; chieftaincy crises are contextually specific phenomena whose causal mechanisms cannot be adequately captured through survey methods; and the Takum case is sufficiently distinct and representative to justify intensive single-case analysis while generating theoretical insights applicable to comparable northern Nigerian contexts (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2022).

Single-case design is appropriate here because Takum LGA represents a theoretically extreme case of chieftaincy politicisation — which Yin (2018) identifies as a legitimate basis for single-case selection when the case provides unusually clear and transparent evidence of a theoretical mechanism.

2 Study Area

Takum Local Government Area is located in the Southern Senatorial District of Taraba State with an estimated population of 290,000 (NPC, 2023 projection). The dominant ethnic

groups include the Kuteb (who hold the Ukwe chieftaincy throne), Jukun, Tiv, Chamba, Fulani, and Hausa-Fulani. The LGA contains three first-class chieftaincy stools: the Ukwe of Takum (Kuteb), the Ibi of Ibi (Jukun), and the Tiv Chieftaincy. Chieftaincy disputes in Takum have a documented history extending back to the 1960s, with the most recent and most politically driven episodes occurring in the 2019–2024 period.

3 Data Collection and Sampling

Primary data were collected through 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over two fieldwork phases: Phase 1 (September–October 2023) and Phase 2 (February–March 2024). Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure coverage of all key stakeholder categories with direct knowledge of chieftaincy politics in Takum LGA.

The sample size of 24 was determined through two considerations. First, theoretical saturation: data collection ceased when no new themes emerged from successive interviews. Saturation was reached at interview 21; three additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation, consistent with Braun and Clarke (2022) guidance that saturation typically occurs between 12 and 24 interviews in homogeneous-to-moderately heterogeneous samples. Second, the purposive sampling logic required achieving representation across seven distinct stakeholder categories (traditional rulers, kingmakers, community elders, political actors, government officials, civil society actors, and legal practitioners), with a minimum of two participants per category to allow within-category comparison.

A pilot test of the interview guide was conducted in September 2023 with two community members not included in the main study. The pilot test revealed that direct questions about political patronage were sometimes answered evasively; the guide was revised to use indirect sequencing — beginning with questions about customary succession procedures before asking about political dynamics — which produced more candid responses in subsequent interviews.

Table 1 shows the distribution of interview participants across categories.

S/N	PARTICIPANT CATEGORY	NUMBER	CODE	SAMPLING METHOD
1	Traditional rulers (current and former)	5	TR-01–TR-05	Purposive
2	Kingmakers and succession committee members	4	KM-01–KM-04	Purposive
3	Community elders and cultural custodians	4	CE-01–CE-04	Purposive
4	Political actors (elected and party officials)	4	PA-01–PA-04	Snowball
5	State government officials (Chieftaincy Dept.)	3	GO-01–GO-03	Purposive
6	Civil society and human rights observers	2	CS-01–CS-02	Purposive
7	Legal practitioners in chieftaincy litigation	2	LP-01–LP-02	Purposive
TOTAL		24	—	—

Source: Authors' fieldwork (2023–2024).

All interviews were conducted in English or Hausa and lasted 60–120 minutes. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity. Interviews were

audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed by both researchers. Secondary data were obtained from Taraba State Gazette publications on chieftaincy, court records from the Taraba State High Court, SEMA situation reports, and the academic literature.

4 Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2022) — selected for its flexibility in identifying both explicit and latent themes across a heterogeneous participant group. The six-phase process was: familiarisation with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing and refining themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up. Thematic saturation was reached by interview 21. Member-checking was conducted with six participants to validate analytical interpretations.

5 Ethics and Positionality

Ethical approval was obtained from the Benue State University Institutional Review Board (Ref: BSU/IRB/2023/047). Both researchers have research and teaching backgrounds in political science in northern Nigeria; one researcher (Orkar) has conducted prior fieldwork in Taraba State.

Positionality requires specific acknowledgement in this study. One researcher's prior familiarity with Taraba's political landscape provided practical fieldwork advantages — enabling access to informants who might not have spoken to outsiders — but also created the risk of confirmation bias and inadvertent over-rapport with particular stakeholder groups. To mitigate these risks, the researchers maintained detailed reflexivity journals throughout fieldwork and analysis; coding was conducted independently by each researcher before joint reconciliation; and interpretations were deliberately stress-tested against the perspectives of participant categories (particularly political actors and government officials) whose accounts were most likely to contradict the researchers' prior expectations. The researchers note that political actors and state officials were, on average, more guarded in their responses than traditional rulers and community members — a pattern that may partly reflect strategic information management rather than absence of knowledge. Findings attributed to these categories are therefore treated with appropriate caution.

6 Limitations

This study has four principal limitations. First, the single-case design provides depth but limits generalisability. The mechanisms identified in Takum reflect that LGA's specific configuration of ethnic diversity, chieftaincy complexity, and political competitiveness. Whether they apply identically in LGAs with simpler or differently structured traditional authority landscapes requires verification through comparative research.

Second, the cross-sectional qualitative design captures perceptions and retrospective accounts at specific points in time. Accounts of events from 2015 to 2022, collected in 2023–2024, are subject to recall effects and post-hoc rationalisation. The use of documentary evidence from court records and state gazettes partially mitigates this limitation by providing contemporaneous independent verification of key events.

Third, access to political actors and senior government officials was constrained by political sensitivity. Four of the seven interview participant categories were willing to speak openly; political actors and government officials were more guarded. This may underrepresent the perspective of those who actively benefit from chieftaincy politicisation.

Fourth, this study relies on phenotypic identification of political interference — the observable political events, statements, and decisions that participants describe. It does not have access to private communications, party meeting minutes, or financial transactions that would allow full documentation of the patronage networks operating beneath the surface of formal processes.

Findings: Mechanisms of Political Interference

The thematic analysis identified four primary mechanisms through which political actors interfere in traditional kingship in Takum LGA. Table 2 summarises the chieftaincy disputes and political events in Takum between 2015 and 2025.

Table 2: Chieftaincy Disputes and Political Context in Takum LGA, 2015–2025

YEAR	CHIEFTAINCY EVENT	POLITICAL CONTEXT	VIOLENCE	OUTCOME	DEATHS
2015	Ukwe stool dispute: Candidate A vs B	Pre-2015 governorship; rival parties back rival claimants	Minor clashes	Candidate A installed	—
2017	Kingmakers challenged by losing faction	Post-election consolidation by new governor	None	Court case filed; stalemate	—
2019	Governor issues new recognition letter	2019 election year; rival candidate promised rival recognition	Moderate	Recognition disputed	1
2021	Incumbent challenged; stool declared vacant	Post-2019; new governor revisits chieftaincy decisions	Serious	Stool suspended	12
2022	Rival claimant presented to state committee	Pre-2023 election; both parties seek Kuteb support	Moderate	Committee split; no recommendation	8
2023	New governor recognises Candidate C	2023 election; new governor installs political ally	Serious	Candidate C on throne; contested	22+
2024	Legal challenge; counter-challenge filed	Post-election consolidation	Minor	High Court case pending	—
2025	High Court orders status quo	Change of government officials	None reported	Case ongoing	—

Source: Compiled from Taraba State Gazette (2015–2025), interview data, court records, and Ibrahim and Danladi (2024).

1 Mechanism 1: Partisan Manipulation of Appointment Processes

The most extensively documented mechanism is the direct manipulation of chieftaincy appointment processes to install preferred candidates. Under the Taraba State Chieftaincy Law, appointment to a first-class stool involves three stages: community selection by the kingmakers and ruling house; recommendation by the Chieftaincy and Community Affairs Committee; and formal recognition by the Governor. Political interference operates at all

three stages, but the Governor's recognition power — which requires no formal justification — is the most consequential point of vulnerability.

Every participant who addressed this mechanism confirmed that the formal appointment process had been compromised by political considerations in the 2015–2024 period. The consistent pattern described was: competing political factions backed competing chieftaincy claimants; the faction closer to the Governor secured recognition of its preferred candidate; when political power changed through gubernatorial elections, the incoming Governor destabilised the recognised ruler's tenure. A kingmaker participant (KM-02) described the dynamic:

The process on paper is about lineage and community choice. In practice, it starts with politicians. Before any vacancy is even formal, party people are already meeting — in Jalingo, in Abuja — deciding who will be the next Ukwe. When those meetings decide, they communicate their decision to the kingmakers. Some kingmakers resist. Most accept, because the consequences of refusing are severe. — KM-02, Kingmaker, Takum, October 2023

A civil society observer (CS-01) described the structural pattern between elections and chieftaincy decisions:

Between 2015 and 2024, every major chieftaincy decision in Takum has been made in the context of an approaching or recent election. Not one appointment has been made at a politically neutral time. Chieftaincy decisions are pre-election investments. A governor who installs your preferred king has purchased your community's votes and your community's silence when governance failures occur. — CS-01, Civil Society Observer, Takum, September 2023

The 2023 appointment of Candidate C as Ukwe illustrates the mechanism clearly. Candidate C had no prior profile in chieftaincy succession discussions before the 2023 elections. His emergence was directly linked to his role as a prominent vote organiser for the APC gubernatorial candidate in the Takum Kuteb community. A political actor participant stated:

The candidate for the throne and the candidate for governor ran together. One was the political mobiliser on the ground; the other was going to State House. After the election, the mobiliser was rewarded. Simple. This is how chieftaincy works in a democratic dispensation in Nigeria. — PA-03, Political Party Official, Jalingo, February 2024

2 Mechanism 2: Strategic Use of Recognition and Derecognition Powers

A second mechanism involves the Governor's power to withdraw recognition from a sitting traditional ruler and to declare a chieftaincy stool vacant. These powers under Section 14 of the Taraba State Chieftaincy Law have been used in Takum not as disciplinary responses to specific breaches of chieftaincy regulations, but as political instruments to destabilise rulers whose community support has become uncertain. A former traditional ruler (TR-03) described the experience:

I received a letter from the Governor's office one Tuesday. No reason given — only that my recognition as Ukwe was withdrawn 'pending review'. I had not been summoned or given any opportunity to respond. I learned later that my community had supported the opposition in the ward elections. That was the real reason. Derecognition is not a legal instrument in Takum — it is a punishment letter. Every ruler knows this. — TR-03, Former Traditional Ruler, Takum, September 2023

A government official (GO-02) confirmed the institutional pattern:

The Chieftaincy Law gives the Governor broad powers for good reasons — to protect communities from unfit rulers. But the practical use of these powers has been entirely political since 2015. The Chieftaincy and Community Affairs Committee has not

initiated a single derecognition review on its own initiative in the past ten years. Every derecognition has originated from the Governor's political office. The law is used, but its purpose has been completely inverted. — **GO-02, Taraba State Chieftaincy and Community Affairs Dept., February 2024**

3 Mechanism 3: Instrumentalisation of Inter-Dynastic Disputes

A third mechanism involves political actors cultivating and deepening pre-existing inter-dynastic chieftaincy disputes for electoral mobilisation. Rather than creating conflicts from nothing, political actors identify existing succession disagreements and amplify them — providing resources, legal support, and political backing to the aligned faction, while delegitimising the rival faction.

The Ukwe chieftaincy dispute involves three ruling houses with historically documented succession rights (Houses A, B, and C). These houses maintained a rotation arrangement since the 1970s. After 2015, community negotiation was progressively displaced by political mediation — with each political faction aligned to one house and prosecuting the dispute through political rather than customary channels. A community elder (CE-02) described the transformation:

Before 2015, when there was a succession question, the community would gather — kingmakers, elders, representatives of all three houses. There would be discussion, sometimes weeks of it. The result was accepted because the process was ours. After 2015, this process was destroyed. Now each house has a politician behind it. The politicians fund the court cases, pay the lawyers, give money to kingmakers. The dispute is no longer about who should be Ukwe. It is about which political network controls the Ukwe stool. — **CE-02, Community Elder, Takum, October 2023**

A legal practitioner (LP-01) confirmed the financial structure:

I have appeared in four chieftaincy cases in Takum since 2019. In three of them, the real instructing client was not the chieftaincy claimant but a political actor — a senator, a former minister, a current commissioner. They fund the litigation because the throne is valuable to them. They are not interested in customary law. They are interested in which candidate gives them control of the Kuteb community. — **LP-01, Legal Practitioner, Taraba High Court, February 2024**

4 Mechanism 4: Judicial Obstruction in Chieftaincy Litigation

A fourth mechanism, identified by eight interview participants and corroborated by court records, involves attempts by political actors to influence judicial outcomes through ex parte injunctions of questionable validity, forum shopping, and use of political influence to obtain favourable judicial decisions.

Between 2015 and 2024, 17 separate court actions were filed in connection with the Ukwe chieftaincy dispute. The pattern of ex parte injunctions obtained against formal recognition processes suggests a strategy of deliberate delay rather than genuine legal resolution. A legal practitioner (LP-02) characterised the litigation approach:

The Takum chieftaincy litigation is not designed to reach judgment. It is designed to maintain uncertainty. As long as there is an unresolved court order — an injunction, a status quo order — the political actors retain leverage. A final judgment would end the political utility of the dispute. No political actor on either side wants a final determination. — **LP-02, Legal Practitioner, Taraba High Court, February 2024**

5 Consequences: Legitimacy Crisis and Governance Failure

All 24 participants described the consequences of political interference as severe and multidimensional. Five primary consequences were identified.

Legitimacy Collapse

The most fundamental consequence is the collapse of the traditional ruler's legitimacy as a community leader. Participants across all categories described the current recognised Ukwe

as 'the governor's man' rather than 'the community's king' — a formulation that precisely captures the Weberian legitimacy deficit of politically manufactured authority.

A real Ukwé is feared, respected, and obeyed because he embodies the ancestors and the community's trust. What we have now in Takum is a man with a government letter. When people see him, they see the governor's signature, not the Ukwé. He cannot resolve a dispute between two neighbours because both know he was appointed by politicians, not by custom. — TR-05, Traditional Ruler, Neighbouring LGA, October 2023

Conflict Mediation Incapacity

The legitimacy crisis directly translates into the incapacity of the traditional institution to perform its historically most important governance function: community conflict mediation. Multiple participants described instances in which the current Ukwé's attempts to mediate inter-ethnic disputes were rejected on the grounds that he was a political partisan rather than a neutral community elder.

During the October 2023 violence, the state government asked the Ukwé to call the communities together for peace talks. The Tiv community refused to attend. Their response was: 'We will not negotiate peace under the chair of a man who was installed by our enemies' candidate.' That is the crisis. A traditional ruler who owes his throne to partisan politics cannot be neutral, no matter his personal intentions.

— GO-01, Taraba State Government Official, February 2024

Communal Violence and Displacement

The chieftaincy dispute was directly implicated in three episodes of communal violence between 2021 and 2023 — each precipitated by a specific political act (an attempted installation ceremony, a withdrawal of recognition, a court order). As documented in Table 2, these episodes resulted in over 40 deaths and approximately 2,800 displaced persons (Taraba SEMA, 2023). The relationship between chieftaincy dispute events and violence onset was confirmed by all security sector participants.

Institutional Erosion

Beyond the immediate crisis, political interference has produced long-term institutional erosion — the degradation of the normative framework, customary practices, and institutional memory that constitute the traditional institution. As kingmakers are paid or pressured to support political choices, and as customary selection procedures are bypassed by court orders and governor's letters, the institutional knowledge governing succession is progressively hollowed out.

The young people in Takum today have never seen a proper installation. They have only seen legal disputes and governor's letters. They think this is how kingship works. They don't know the ceremonies, the oaths, the consultations that a real installation requires. When our elders die, that knowledge dies with them. The politicians have not just stolen the throne — they have stolen the institution itself. — CE-04, Community Elder and Cultural Custodian, Takum, October 2023

— CE-04, Community Elder and Cultural Custodian, Takum, October 2023

Political Feedback Loop

The study identifies a political feedback loop sustaining the interference dynamic. Once traditional kingship is politicised, all subsequent political actors are incentivised to maintain and deepen that politicisation — because any actor who steps back cedes an influence resource to rivals. This creates a collective action problem: every political actor would benefit from a world without chieftaincy politicisation, but no individual actor has an incentive to unilaterally withdraw. Only structural reform that removes the Governor's discretionary recognition power can break this loop.

Discussion

The findings confirm and significantly deepen the existing literature on political interference in traditional kingship in Nigeria (Adekunle, 2015; Nweke, 2022; Abubakar, 2020), while generating original contributions that challenge or refine several prior positions.

The neo-patrimonial framework (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007) is strongly supported by the findings. The simultaneous existence of formal chieftaincy law and informal patronage networks — with formal instruments deployed to achieve patrimonial outcomes — is precisely the institutional hybridity that neo-patrimonialism describes. This confirms North's (1990) prediction that formal institutions with weak enforcement mechanisms will be captured by informal organisations that benefit from their subversion. However, the Takum evidence extends the neo-patrimonial analysis in two important ways. First, prior neo-patrimonial accounts of chieftaincy in Nigeria (Adekunle, 2015; Abubakar, 2020) treat political actors as rational opportunists exploiting an existing vulnerability. The Takum findings suggest a more active dynamic: political actors are not merely exploiting structural openings but actively creating them — through sustained cultivation of dynastic rivalries, strategic financing of legal challenges, and deliberate maintenance of institutional ambiguity. The distinction matters for reform: if political actors are merely opportunistic, closing the opportunity (the Governor's recognition power) may be sufficient; if they are actively cultivating the conditions for interference, more comprehensive structural reform is required. Second, while neo-patrimonialism emphasises vertical principal-agent relationships between governors and community actors, the Takum case reveals a horizontal dimension: competing political factions at the same tier of government (within the same party, as well as between parties) are simultaneously using chieftaincy as a competitive resource. This horizontal dimension of chieftaincy politicisation has not been adequately theorised in the existing literature and represents a contribution of this study to neo-patrimonial theory.

The consistent characterisation of the politically installed Ukwe as 'the governor's man' rather than 'the community's king' directly confirms Beetham's (1991) analysis of the conditions of legitimate authority. Political appointment violates all three of Beetham's conditions: it does not conform to established customary rules; it is justified by political rather than traditional criteria; and it lacks the expressed consent of the governed communities. The consequence — an illegitimate ruler who cannot perform the conflict mediation function — confirms Ojukwu and Olaifa (2022). However, the Takum findings challenge one dimension of Ojukwu and Olaifa's (2022) analysis. They treat traditional institution legitimacy as a relatively stable property that can be developed through capacity building and governance reform. The Takum evidence suggests instead that legitimacy can be destroyed rapidly by a single political act (a recognition letter, a contentious installation) — and that rebuilding it takes far longer than destroying it. This asymmetry between legitimacy destruction and legitimacy reconstruction has important implications for policy: it means that preventing interference is far more efficient than restoring legitimacy after interference has occurred. Norris (2012) argues that democratic legitimacy requires performance as well as procedural fairness. The Takum case confirms this: even participants sympathetic to the current Ukwe acknowledge that his legitimacy crisis stems not only from the manner of his appointment but from his subsequent inability to mediate community conflicts — performance failure compounds procedural failure. This dual legitimacy deficit makes recovery without structural reform particularly difficult.

The judicial capture finding extends Orkar's (2023) work on chieftaincy and conflict by documenting a specific mechanism not previously identified in the Nigerian chieftaincy literature: the deliberate use of litigation to prevent institutional resolution rather than to achieve it. LP-02's characterisation of chieftaincy litigation as 'designed to maintain

uncertainty' identifies judicial proceedings as a governance sabotage tool — the intentional use of the judicial system to preserve the political value of an unresolved dispute. This finding has broader implications for understanding judicial involvement in chieftaincy disputes across Nigeria. The proliferation of chieftaincy litigation is frequently interpreted as a sign of greater rule-of-law consciousness — communities seeking legal rather than violent resolution of disputes. The Takum evidence complicates this interpretation: courts can be instrumentalised to perpetuate rather than resolve chieftaincy crises, particularly when political actors have sufficient resources and political connections to use the legal system strategically. Reforming chieftaincy dispute resolution requires addressing this judicial dimension as well as the executive recognition power.

The political feedback loop mechanism — the self-reinforcing dynamic through which chieftaincy politicisation becomes entrenched as a structural feature rather than a series of individual interventions — is this study's most original theoretical contribution. It explains the pattern documented in Table 2 (successive chieftaincy crises corresponding to successive political transitions) as a predictable product of the structural incentives of multi-party electoral competition in the presence of a Governor's discretionary recognition power. The feedback loop mechanism challenges the implicit assumption in both Adekunle (2015) and Nweke (2022) that individual political actors' choices drive chieftaincy crises. The Takum evidence suggests that individual actors have limited freedom of choice: any governor who declines to use chieftaincy recognition power for political purposes cedes an influence resource to rivals. This structural compulsion — not mere political opportunism — sustains the interference dynamic. The theoretical implication is that individual-level reforms (better governors, more ethical politicians) are insufficient; only structural reforms that eliminate the discretionary recognition power can break the feedback loop.

Conclusions

This study has provided the first comprehensive, qualitatively grounded analysis of political interference in traditional kingship in Takum LGA, Taraba State, covering the period 2015–2025. Through 24 in-depth interviews and analysis of primary documents, the study identified four mechanisms of political interference — partisan appointment manipulation, strategic derecognition, instrumentalisation of inter-dynastic disputes, and judicial obstruction — and documented their consequences: legitimacy collapse, conflict mediation incapacity, communal violence, institutional erosion, and a self-reinforcing political feedback loop. The central conclusion is that the chieftaincy crisis in Takum LGA is not a succession dispute but a governance crisis — one produced and sustained by the structural conditions of competitive democracy operating through the Governor's discretionary chieftaincy recognition power. Individual political actors behave rationally given these structural conditions; the solution must therefore be structural. The findings have broader implications for traditional institutions across northern Nigeria. The mechanisms identified in Takum are the product of structural conditions — constitutional ambiguity of traditional institutions, executive recognition power, multi-party electoral competition, and weak chieftaincy law enforcement — that are common to all northern Nigerian states. The Takum case therefore has general relevance for policy across the region.

Policy Recommendations

1. The National Assembly and state houses of assembly should amend relevant state chieftaincy laws to: replace the Governor's discretionary recognition power with a statutory Chieftaincy Selection Board whose decisions are governed by clear legal criteria and insulated from executive override; establish security of tenure for recognised traditional rulers terminable only through a formal process subject to judicial review; and codify customary succession procedures for each chieftaincy stool, making them legally binding.

2. Specialised Chieftaincy and Traditional Institutions Tribunals should be established — composed of senior judges, traditional law experts, and community elder representatives — with exclusive jurisdiction over chieftaincy disputes, fast-track procedures (maximum 90 days to final determination), and strict prohibition on ex parte injunctions without formal notice to all affected parties.
3. State chieftaincy laws should prohibit new chieftaincy appointments, upgrades, and derecognitions during the 12 months preceding and the 6 months following any gubernatorial or state assembly election. This moratorium would reduce the incentive to use chieftaincy decisions as pre-election patronage.
4. The National Human Rights Commission and state-based civil society organisations should establish a Traditional Institution Governance Monitoring Programme — tracking chieftaincy appointment processes, documenting interference incidents, publishing annual transparency reports, and providing legal aid to communities whose chieftaincy processes have been manipulated.
5. The Taraba State Government, in partnership with Taraba State University and NIPSS, should deliver a structured capacity-building programme for traditional rulers on conflict mediation, governance, accountability, and their constitutional rights against political interference.

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