

GOVERNING IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: Persistent insecurity poses a significant challenge to democratic governance, particularly where prolonged violence weakens institutional capacity, public trust and the legitimacy of state authority. Although existing scholarship has extensively examined insecurity, democratic consolidation and governance, these strands remain insufficiently integrated in explaining how sustained security pressures cumulatively reshape the institutional, relational and normative foundations of democracy. This study examines how persistent insecurity has influenced Nigeria's democratic governance since 1999, focusing on state legitimacy, institutional capacity, accountability, public trust and citizen participation. It adopts an integrated State Legitimacy and Democratic Consolidation Theories to explain how security threats and governmental responses affect democratic institutions and political relationships. The study employs a qualitative research design based on systematic analysis of relevant secondary evidence, including scholarly literature, institutional reports, policy documents and official records. The findings indicate that persistent insecurity has not produced democratic breakdown but has generated cumulative pressures on democratic governance through weakened institutional effectiveness, declining public confidence, constrained civic participation, reduced accountability and the expansion of security-oriented state practices. The study argues that democratic resilience therefore depends not only on security effectiveness but also on legitimate, accountable

and participatory governance. It recommends strengthening civilian oversight, institutional coordination, transparency, accountability and citizen participation in security governance. These reforms are essential for restoring public trust and consolidating Nigeria's democratic institutions under conditions of persistent insecurity.

Keywords: *Democratic consolidation; State legitimacy; Persistent insecurity; Security governance; Nigeria*

1. Introduction

Persistent insecurity has become an increasingly important challenge to democratic governance because its consequences extend beyond the immediate incidence of violence. Prolonged insecurity can affect how states exercise authority, allocate public resources, protect rights, maintain institutional accountability and sustain citizens' confidence in government. Although democratic regimes can withstand episodes of violence without experiencing regime collapse, sustained insecurity may gradually alter state-society relations by weakening institutional capacity, constraining political participation and encouraging expanded reliance on coercive authority. Democratic resilience therefore depends not only on the survival of elections and constitutional institutions, but also on their capacity to retain legitimacy, accountability and public support while responding to serious security threats (Holloway & Manwaring, 2023). The relationship between insecurity and democracy is consequently neither linear nor deterministic. Weak state capacity may undermine governmental legitimacy, while coercive responses that are excessive, discriminatory or insufficiently accountable may generate a parallel crisis of legitimacy. The central issue is therefore how democratic states can provide effective security without compromising the institutional and normative principles through which democratic authority is legitimised.

Nigeria offers an important empirical setting for examining this tension. Since the restoration of civilian rule in 1999, the country has maintained uninterrupted constitutional government and regular multiparty elections, making the Fourth Republic its longest period of continuous democratic rule. Yet this democratic continuity has coincided with persistent and increasingly complex security challenges, including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency in the North-East, banditry and

kidnapping in the North-West and North-Central regions, farmer–herder and communal violence, separatist-related violence in the South-East, militancy, organised criminality and recurrent electoral violence. These challenges are significant not merely because of their human and material costs, but because of their cumulative implications for the capacity, reach and legitimacy of public authority. Awopeju and Adesina (2023), for example, associate prolonged insecurity with constraints on democratic consolidation through its implications for elections, transparency, electoral integrity and institutional effectiveness. Nigeria consequently presents a critical democratic paradox: formal democratic continuity has persisted alongside conditions capable of weakening the institutional foundations required for democratic consolidation.

This paradox also raises fundamental questions about the governance of coercive authority. Persistent violence can undermine the state’s ability to protect citizens, maintain territorial control, deliver services and sustain public confidence. In response, governments may expand military and police operations, strengthen emergency security measures or rely increasingly on coercive strategies. Nigeria’s counterinsurgency experience illustrates the dilemma, as approaches centred predominantly on military stabilisation have been criticised for insufficiently addressing the political and developmental dimensions of insecurity (de Simone & Iocchi, 2022). At the same time, where formal security institutions are perceived as ineffective, communities may increasingly depend on vigilantes, community security groups and other non-state actors. Odion et al. (2024) identify local non-state actors as increasingly significant partners in security provision, while Lord-Mallam (2024) demonstrates how co-produced security arrangements can blur conventional boundaries between state and non-state authority. Such arrangements may demonstrate adaptive community capacity, but they also raise questions about legitimate coercion, accountability and democratic oversight. Security governance therefore becomes central to understanding how persistent violence affects democratic institutions and state–society relations.

The consequences are particularly important for political participation and democratic legitimacy. Violence can restrict access to polling stations, displace populations, intimidate voters and candidates, disrupt electoral administration and encourage political withdrawal. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that insecurity and violence can inhibit voter participation

and contribute to political apathy (Tonwe et al., 2021). Similarly, evidence from the 2023 presidential election identifies insecurity, electoral violence, intimidation, weak law enforcement and displacement as factors constraining participation in affected communities (Abdulyakeen & Mumuni, 2024). Electoral insecurity therefore has implications beyond individual elections because when citizens cannot participate freely and safely, the representative and legitimating functions of elections are weakened. Election-related violence consequently constitutes both a security and democratic-governance problem (Jombo & Bamigbose, 2023).

Despite these insights, the literature remains analytically fragmented. Security scholarship has largely examined terrorism, insurgency, banditry, communal violence and other forms of insecurity; studies of Nigerian democracy have focused on elections, political participation and democratic institutions; while emerging security-governance research has examined militarisation, community policing and non-state security actors (Tonwe et al., 2021; Jombo & Bamigbose, 2023; Elewomawu, 2024). These strands have generated important explanations of particular dimensions of Nigeria's security and democratic challenges, but they have rarely been integrated into an account of how persistent insecurity cumulatively transforms the institutional, relational and behavioural foundations of democratic consolidation. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the interaction between state capacity, legitimacy, accountability, citizen trust and political participation under prolonged security pressure. The gap is therefore not simply empirical but analytical: existing approaches provide limited explanation of why democratic institutions may remain formally intact while the conditions necessary for their consolidation become progressively weakened.

This study addresses this gap by examining how persistent security challenges have shaped governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria since 1999. It focuses specifically on the relationship between state legitimacy, institutional capacity, accountability, citizen trust, political participation and the exercise of coercive security authority. The study asks four questions: **(1)** How have persistent security challenges affected state legitimacy and governance in Nigeria since 1999? **(2)** How have governmental responses to insecurity influenced democratic institutions, accountability and civil liberties? **(3)** How has persistent insecurity affected citizen trust, political participation and state–society

relations? and (4) What conditions are necessary for democratic consolidation amid continuing security challenges?

The study is theoretically anchored in an integrated State Legitimacy and Democratic Consolidation framework. State Legitimacy Theory provides a basis for examining whether the state's capacity to exercise coercive authority is matched by perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, accountability and rightful authority. Democratic Consolidation Theory, in turn, enables assessment of whether democratic institutions, norms and practices remain sufficiently institutionalised and resilient under sustained pressure. Together, the frameworks shift analytical attention beyond whether elections continue towards whether democratic institutions remain legitimate, accountable, participatory and rights-protective while managing insecurity.

The importance of this paper lies in providing additional evidence of two related contributions. First, it conceptualises persistent insecurity not simply as a failure of security provision but as a governance condition capable of transforming the institutional, relational and normative foundations of democracy. Second, it advances a dual-pathway explanation of the security–democracy relationship. State incapacity to provide effective security can weaken legitimacy, public trust and democratic participation, while insufficiently accountable coercive governance can constrain rights and institutional accountability. Conversely, effective, lawful and legitimate security provision can strengthen institutional trust and democratic resilience. The central argument, therefore, is that persistent insecurity does not inevitably produce democratic breakdown; rather, it constitutes a critical test of democratic consolidation. Nigeria's democratic future depends substantially on whether security governance can protect citizens while remaining legitimate, accountable, participatory and institutionally constrained.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Security Challenges

Security challenges refer to conditions, threats and organised violence that endanger human life, public order, territorial integrity, institutional stability and the capacity of legitimate authorities to protect citizens. Contemporary scholarship extends beyond state-centred approaches by examining how socially and politically constructed threats and how

their designation as security problems shapes governmental responses (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq et al., 2016). From a securitisation perspective, framing issues as existential threats may legitimise exceptional political action (Balzacq et al., 2016).

Security challenges differ in sources, objectives and consequences. Conventional threats concern sovereignty and territorial integrity; internal armed conflicts involve sustained violence between state forces and insurgent, separatist or other armed groups; organised criminal violence includes kidnapping, banditry, trafficking and criminal networks; communal violence involves conflicts over land, resources, identity, representation and authority; while political violence encompasses electoral violence, intimidation, repression and political mobilisation. These challenges involve both state and non-state actors, including security agencies, insurgents, militias, vigilantes and criminal networks.

In Nigeria, these categories frequently overlap. Banditry may combine criminal, territorial and political objectives, while communal conflicts can intersect with criminal networks and political competition. Consequently, the analytical concern is not merely the frequency of violent incidents but their cumulative effects on public authority and state–society relations. Prolonged insecurity can reshape security provision and encourage reliance on alternative arrangements where formal institutions are perceived as ineffective (Nwozor et al., 2021). Security challenges are therefore conceptualised as both security conditions and governance pressures capable of affecting state capacity, institutional effectiveness, public legitimacy and democratic resilience.

2.2 Governance

Governance refers to the processes, institutions and relationships through which public authority is exercised, collective decisions are made and public problems addressed. It encompasses institutional capacity, rule of law, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, service provision and citizen participation. Governance therefore concerns not merely whether the state possesses authority, but how that authority is exercised, constrained and legitimised.

This distinction is critical under conditions of insecurity. A state may possess substantial coercive capacity while experiencing governance deficits when institutions cannot adequately protect citizens, deliver services, uphold the rule of law or sustain public

confidence. Governance thus combines capacity and legitimacy dimensions: effective security responses must also remain lawful, accountable and responsive.

Security governance further challenges the assumption that the state is the sole security provider. Bagayoko et al. (2016) demonstrate that African security governance frequently involves interactions among formal and informal institutions and state and non-state actors. Such hybrid arrangements may arise from deficits in state capacity or legitimacy and provide locally embedded mechanisms of protection and dispute management. However, they are not inherently democratic or equitable and may reproduce exclusion, local hierarchies and weak accountability (Bagayoko et al., 2016).

This perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where formal security agencies increasingly interact with vigilantes, community security groups, traditional authorities and other local actors. Research documents the growing role of non-state actors in responding to security deficits (Nwozor et al., 2021; Odion et al., 2024). Accordingly, governance is conceptualised as the legitimate, effective and accountable exercise of public authority, encompassing the capacity to provide security, uphold rights, ensure institutional accountability and facilitate meaningful citizen participation.

2.3 Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation extends beyond the continued existence of electoral institutions to the institutionalisation of democratic norms, rules and practices. It occurs when political actors and citizens accept democracy as the legitimate and preferred framework for political competition and public authority. Nigeria's uninterrupted civilian government and regular elections since 1999 demonstrate democratic continuity, but continuity does not necessarily constitute consolidation. Consolidation requires institutionalised procedures, accountability, rule of law, civilian control of coercive institutions, protection of rights, meaningful participation, acceptance of electoral outcomes and peaceful political competition.

The concept is closely linked to democratic resilience, understood as democracy's capacity to withstand and adapt to crises while preserving its essential characteristics. Merkel and Lührmann (2021) emphasise resistance to authoritarian and illiberal challenges, while Boese et al. (2021) highlight both endurance and adaptation. Holloway and Manwaring

(2023) similarly distinguish resilience from mere regime survival by emphasising institutional mechanisms for responding to crises.

This distinction is particularly important in Nigeria, where persistent insecurity may restrict participation, weaken institutional confidence, disrupt elections and encourage militarised responses that prioritise coercive stability over accountability. Nigerian scholarship associates insecurity and state responses with challenges to democratic consolidation (Awopeju & Adesina, 2023).

Accordingly, this study understands consolidation as more than electoral survival: it requires legitimate, accountable, participatory and rights-protective institutions capable of managing insecurity without compromising democratic principles. Analytically, persistent insecurity may weaken state capacity and legitimacy; securitised and unaccountable responses may constrain rights and participation, thereby weakening democratic resilience. Conversely, effective and legitimate security governance may strengthen citizen trust and institutional resilience.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts integrated theories of State Legitimacy and Democratic Consolidation to explain how persistent insecurity may shape Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

State Legitimacy Theory

Weber's conception of legitimacy establishes a foundational distinction between coercive power and legitimate authority. For Weber (1922/1978), political authority becomes stable when obedience rests not merely on coercion but on the belief that authority is rightful. His distinction among traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority is particularly relevant to modern constitutional states, where legitimate authority operates through lawful institutions, established procedures and legally defined offices.

This distinction is central to Nigeria's security dilemma. Although the state possesses substantial coercive institutions, coercive capacity does not automatically produce legitimate authority. When citizens perceive the state as unable to protect them, to apply laws selectively, to abuse coercive power, or to ensure accountability, a gap emerges between de facto power and legitimate authority. Persistent insecurity can therefore

undermine legitimacy through ineffective protection and excessive, arbitrary or unaccountable coercive responses.

This proposition has empirical relevance in Nigeria. Kweitsu (2023) reported that 77% of Nigerians considered the country somewhat or very unsafe, with insecurity among leading problems requiring government action (Mbaegbu & Duntoye, 2023). Similarly, only about two in ten Nigerians believed government was performing well in combating crime, while significant proportions reported bribery in police interactions (Kweitsu, 2023).

Weber's perspective is complemented by Levi, Sacks and Tyler's (2009) theory of legitimating beliefs, which emphasises trustworthiness and procedural justice. Levi and Sacks (2009) similarly argue that effective and fair governance strengthens legitimacy and voluntary compliance.

The framework identifies two pathways: persistent insecurity → perceived state incapacity → declining legitimacy → democratic vulnerability, and effective, lawful security provision → perceived competence and fairness → institutional trust → democratic resilience. Thus, the quality of state response mediates insecurity's democratic effects.

Democratic Consolidation Theory

The second principal foundation is Linz and Stepan's (1996) theory of democratic consolidation. Consolidation extends beyond the establishment or survival of electoral institutions to the point at which political actors and citizens regard democratic institutions and procedures as the legitimate and durable framework for political competition and conflict management.

For Nigeria, this distinction is crucial. Continuous civilian government and regular elections since 1999 demonstrate democratic continuity, but not necessarily deep consolidation. Consolidation requires institutionalised democratic procedures, political accountability, rule of law, civilian control of coercive institutions, protection of civil and political rights, meaningful participation, acceptance of electoral outcomes and peaceful political competition.

Ongoing insecurity can exert pressure on various dimensions by limiting political mobilisation, displacing communities, interrupting elections, and fostering calls for

extraordinary security measures. Additionally, it may enhance the political power of security agencies and incentivise a focus on coercive stability rather than democratic accountability. Research in Nigeria has similarly connected insecurity and governmental responses to issues related to elections, transparency, electoral integrity, and democratic institutions (Awopeju & Adesina, 2023). Consequently, this study aims to broaden the analysis of democratic consolidation by investigating the legitimacy mechanisms through which ongoing insecurity influences the institutionalisation of democracy.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Security, State Capacity and Public Authority

Security and state capacity are closely connected because the state is expected not only to possess coercive power but also to exercise legitimate authority, enforce law, provide public goods and protect citizens. Weber's (1978) conception of the state as an organisation claiming a monopoly of legitimate physical force remains foundational; however, contemporary scholarship demonstrates that state capacity extends beyond coercion. Hanson and Sigman (2021), for example, distinguish among coercive, administrative and fiscal dimensions of state capacity.

This distinction is particularly important under prolonged insecurity. Governments may increase military expenditure or deploy security personnel while remaining unable to provide reliable, equitable and accountable protection. Persistent insecurity may consequently indicate not simply inadequate coercive resources but weaknesses in territorial governance, institutional coordination, service provision and public authority.

Nigeria illustrates this tension. Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, farmer–herder violence, communal conflict and separatist-related violence have challenged state authority across different regions. Onwuzuruigbo (2020) demonstrates how poorly governed forest spaces in northern Nigeria have facilitated bandit enclaves and alternative forms of coercive authority, while Aina et al. (2023) highlight increasing reliance on military operations to address armed banditry in north-western Nigeria. Consequently, insecurity is not merely evidence of violent threats; it is also a test of the state's ability to exercise effective and legitimate authority. Where citizens perceive formal institutions as unable to protect them, alternative security providers may acquire greater practical

authority, thereby complicating the relationship between state capacity and state legitimacy.

4.2 Violence and Democratic Governance

Violence affects democratic governance through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Directly, insecurity can disrupt elections, displace voters, restrict campaigning, intimidate political actors and limit political rights. Indirectly, prolonged exposure to violence may generate fear, weaken institutional trust, discourage participation and normalise coercive forms of political competition.

Democratic consolidation should therefore not be equated with the survival of electoral institutions. Linz and Stepan (1996) conceptualise consolidation as the process through which democracy becomes deeply institutionalised and accepted as the legitimate framework for political competition, while Diamond (1999) emphasises institutional performance, accountability and democratic norms. From this perspective, elections are necessary but insufficient indicators of democratic consolidation.

Comparative evidence reinforces this argument. Veri and Sass (2023) demonstrate that institutionalised democratic participation can constrain political violence, suggesting that participation and security may be mutually reinforcing. Conversely, where insecurity restricts participation, democracy loses an important mechanism for managing political conflict peacefully.

This relationship is evident in Nigeria, where persistent insecurity has affected electoral participation, displacement and the conditions of political competition. Awopeju and Adesina (2023) argue that insecurity and state responses have significant implications for elections, internally displaced populations and electoral integrity. Thus, a democracy may remain formally intact while becoming substantively weaker: elections may continue, yet citizens may experience unequal opportunities for political participation because of displacement, intimidation, restricted mobility or fear.

4.3 Insecurity, Legitimacy and Citizen Trust

A further body of scholarship highlights the importance of state legitimacy and citizen trust. Weber (1978) places legitimacy at the centre of political authority, while Levi et al.

(2009) demonstrate that institutional fairness, trustworthiness and procedural justice are important foundations of legitimating beliefs.

Security provision is a major arena through which such perceptions are formed. Citizens expect the state to protect lives, property and livelihoods; persistent failure to do so may therefore undermine confidence in public institutions. Conversely, effective, lawful and fair security provision can strengthen perceptions of governmental competence and legitimate authority.

Recent Nigerian evidence illustrates this relationship. Afrobarometer surveys identify insecurity and limited confidence in security institutions as major public concerns, while Kweitsu (2023) reports substantial dissatisfaction with government performance in reducing crime and low levels of trust in the police. Insecurity is therefore experienced not only as a physical threat but also as an assessment of governmental effectiveness and trustworthiness.

The relationship may become mutually reinforcing:

insecurity → perceived state failure → declining trust → reduced citizen cooperation → weaker security effectiveness → continuing insecurity.

Nevertheless, insecurity does not inevitably produce declining legitimacy. The quality of governmental response is crucial. Effective, fair and accountable security governance can strengthen cooperation and institutional trust, whereas arbitrary or discriminatory responses may deepen public distrust.

The emergence of non-state security arrangements further demonstrates this complexity. Bagayoko et al. (2016) conceptualise African security governance as frequently hybrid, involving interactions among formal and informal institutions. In Nigeria, community policing, vigilante organisations, traditional authorities and other local arrangements have emerged partly in response to deficits in formal protection. Sarafa and Monday (2023), for example, demonstrate the potential contribution of community policing to internal security.

However, pluralised security governance also creates accountability dilemmas. Non-state actors may improve local protection while operating outside effective institutional

oversight. The critical issue is therefore whether these arrangements complement legitimate public authority or gradually substitute for it.

4.5 Nigerian Security Scholarship and the Problem of Fragmentation

Nigerian scholarship provides substantial empirical evidence on different manifestations of insecurity. Studies of Boko Haram and ISWAP examine insurgency and counter-insurgency; research on banditry highlights ungoverned spaces, criminal economies and weak territorial control; while studies of farmer–herder conflict connect violence to land use, resource competition, political mobilisation and inadequate security responses (Nwozor et al., 2021). Scholarship on kidnapping increasingly examines its political economy and relationship with institutional weakness (Omotola & Oyewole, 2023). Research on policing similarly addresses corruption, professionalism, accountability and citizen trust, while studies of community security arrangements consider the contribution of local actors to internal security.

The principal limitation is therefore not an absence of scholarship but fragmentation. Boko Haram is often treated as an insurgency problem, banditry as organised crime, farmer–herder violence as communal or resource conflict, kidnapping as criminality, electoral violence as a democratic problem, militarisation as a security issue and policing as an institutional problem. Such compartmentalisation can obscure their cumulative consequences.

Although these forms of insecurity differ in their causes, actors and geographical concentration, they can converge in their effects on state authority, institutional accountability, citizen trust and political participation. An integrated analysis is therefore necessary to understand how different security pressures interact with broader processes of democratic governance.

Thus, the literature above establishes four broad propositions. First, persistent insecurity can expose weaknesses in state capacity, territorial control and institutional effectiveness. Secondly, violence can restrict political participation, disrupt elections and alter political and citizen behaviour. Thirdly, ineffective or unfair security provision can undermine state legitimacy and citizen trust. Fourthly, coercive responses insufficiently constrained by democratic institutions can weaken civil liberties, accountability and institutional checks.

5. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative secondary-data case-study design to examine how persistent security challenges have shaped governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2026). Nigeria was treated as a bounded case, enabling analysis within its real-world political and security context (Yin, 2018). Exclusive reliance on secondary qualitative evidence was appropriate given the extensive documentary and scholarly materials available (Hinds et al., 1997; Sherif, 2018). The analysis was guided by an integrated State Legitimacy and Democratic Consolidation framework, with securitisation used selectively to interpret security framing and governmental responses.

Nigeria was purposively selected because it combines democratic continuity with persistent and geographically uneven insecurity. The study was bounded temporally from 1999 to 2026 and substantively around state legitimacy, institutional accountability, citizen trust, political participation and coercive security responses (Yin, 2018). To capture temporal variation, the period was divided into four analytical phases: 1999–2009, democratic re-emergence and emerging security challenges; 2010–2015, intensified Boko Haram insurgency and counter-insurgency; 2016–2019, diversification of insecurity, including farmer–herder conflict, kidnapping and communal violence; and 2020–2026, wider insecurity alongside heightened concerns about policing, militarisation, civic freedoms and democratic accountability.

Evidence was drawn from government publications, official datasets, international organisations, conflict-monitoring institutions, peer-reviewed scholarship and civil-society reports. Sources were purposively selected based on relevance, methodological credibility, institutional reliability, temporal currency, Nigerian applicability and transparency. Evidence was cross-checked across independent sources, while anonymous, unverified and methodologically opaque materials were excluded (Yin, 2018; Miles et al., 2019).

Data were analysed through thematic qualitative content analysis, involving familiarisation, coding, categorisation, theme development and systematic review (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). Deductive coding reflected legitimacy, accountability and democratic consolidation, while inductive analysis captured emergent patterns.

Comparative matrices facilitated analysis across periods, threats and institutional responses (Miles et al., 2019).

Source triangulation strengthened credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Documentary limitations and institutional biases were acknowledged, and claims were not based on isolated evidence. Overall, the design provides a systematic basis for analysing how persistent insecurity affects legitimacy, governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

6. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of secondary evidence from Nigeria's Fourth Republic demonstrates that persistent insecurity affects state capacity, legitimacy, political participation, civil liberties, accountability and security provision beyond the immediate effects of violence. Four interrelated themes emerged, interpreted through State Legitimacy Theory and Democratic Consolidation Theory.

6.1 Persistent Insecurity and the Erosion of State Legitimacy

The first finding is that persistent insecurity has become a fundamental test of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Nigerian state. Its significance extends beyond violent incidents and casualties to citizens' perceptions of the state's capacity, responsiveness and legitimacy to provide protection. Weber's (1978) conception of legitimate authority and Levi et al.'s (2009) emphasis on fairness, trustworthiness and competence are particularly relevant because effective security provision is central to how citizens evaluate public authority.

The evidence indicates a substantial legitimacy deficit within Nigeria's security sector. Kweitsu (2023) reported that 61% of Nigerians felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhoods and 51% feared crime in their homes, while only **21%** believed government was performing well in reducing crime and 15% expressed some or substantial trust in the police. Furthermore, 73% perceived most or all police officials as corrupt. These patterns indicate that insecurity functions simultaneously as a security and legitimacy problem.

The geographical spread of Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, farmer–herder violence and separatist-related insecurity further demonstrates uneven state

capacity. Human Rights Watch (2024) documents continuing violence across the north-west, north-central and north-east, alongside separatist-related insecurity in the south-east. Where state protection is perceived as ineffective, distant or intermittent, alternative security actors may acquire practical authority.

Legitimacy deficits are further intensified when insecurity coincides with corruption, excessive force and weak accountability. Kweitsu (2023) found that 75% of Nigerians seeking police assistance reported paying a bribe, while 55% encountering police in other circumstances reported similar experiences. The UNDP (2024) likewise identifies serious insecurity, an overburdened justice and security sector, rule-of-law weaknesses and diminished institutional trust.

The central finding is that persistent insecurity transforms how citizens evaluate state legitimacy: constitutional authority becomes less persuasive when it is not matched by effective, accountable and rights-protective security provision.

6.2 Violence and Democratic Participation

The second finding is that persistent insecurity constrains democratic participation beyond election-day violence by restricting citizens' mobility, political organisation, campaigning, voting and engagement with public institutions. Violence, intimidation, displacement and prolonged fear can reduce participation while weakening confidence in democratic institutions' capacity to provide protection and representation.

Freedom House (2024) documents violence at polling locations during Nigeria's 2023 elections, voter intimidation and interference by armed groups, including instances where citizens were prevented from voting. Awopeju and Adesina (2023) similarly identify electoral disruption, violence, displacement and weakened institutions as consequences of insecurity and governmental responses. Thus, insecurity affects not only electoral outcomes but the physical accessibility of democratic participation.

Displacement is particularly consequential. Freedom House (2024) reported approximately 2.3 million internally displaced persons in north-east Nigeria as of December 2023, while noting restrictions on freedom of movement by armed and criminal groups. Citizens may therefore retain formal political rights while losing the practical capacity to exercise them.

Insecurity can also restrict political meetings, campaigning and access to communities, producing spatially uneven democratic participation.

Freedom House (2024) further indicates that intimidation, vote buying and the local influence of armed groups can shape political choices in some areas. The findings consequently distinguish between formal and effective participation: legal entitlement to vote or campaign does not guarantee meaningful participation where insecurity imposes unequal risks and constraints.

The democratic implication is that persistent insecurity can produce unequal political citizenship, whereby conflict-affected populations bear greater costs in exercising rights formally available to all. When insecurity closes peaceful channels for political expression and grievance management, alienation from formal institutions may increase, potentially weakening democratic consolidation.

6.3 Shrinking Civic Space and Democratic Accountability

The third finding concerns the relationship between insecurity, civic space and institutional accountability. The evidence does not suggest that all restrictions on civic activity are directly caused by insecurity. Rather, security concerns can strengthen the justification for restrictions on protest, journalism, association and dissent, creating tension between security imperatives and democratic accountability.

Nigeria's #EndSARS protests illustrate this tension. Etim et al. (2022) identified weaknesses in police complaints mechanisms and protest-policing practices, demonstrating the consequences of treating public mobilisation primarily as a security concern. Amnesty International documented arrests, restrictions on peaceful assembly and the use of force during the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests, while Human Rights Watch raised concerns about governmental warnings preceding the demonstrations.

Press freedom presents a related accountability challenge. Human Rights Watch reported the detention of investigative journalist Daniel Ojukwu under the Cybercrimes Act and broader harassment of journalists covering sensitive issues. Freedom House likewise identified harassment and arrests affecting journalists reporting on corruption, human-rights violations and separatist violence. These developments matter because democratic

accountability depends on citizens' access to information about governmental performance and security-sector conduct.

The evidence therefore indicates a potential feedback mechanism: insecurity → heightened security pressures → reduced scrutiny → weaker accountability → greater opportunities for institutional abuse or failure → declining trust. Nevertheless, civic space has not been completely closed. Freedom House describes a broad and vibrant civil society alongside significant restrictions in particular contexts. The finding is therefore one of contested and uneven civic space, rather than democratic closure.

6.4 Fragmentation and Pluralisation of Security Authority

The fourth finding is that persistent insecurity has contributed to the fragmentation and pluralisation of security authority. Where formal institutions provide inadequate protection, citizens increasingly rely on vigilantes, community security groups, traditional authorities and local protection networks. This does not necessarily indicate state collapse but reflects the hybrid character of African security governance, where formal and informal actors interact and contest authority (Bagayoko et al., 2016).

Nweke and Nwankwo (2023), for example, associate the growth of vigilante organisations in south-eastern Nigeria with perceived weaknesses in formal security provision. Their local knowledge and responsiveness may complement state capacity through intelligence, early warning, mediation and protection. However, dependence on non-state actors may develop into institutional substitution where communities increasingly rely on informal authorities because formal institutions are perceived as ineffective.

The critical issue is accountability. Unlike formal security institutions, informal actors may lack consistent legislative, judicial and administrative oversight. Responsibility for abuses can consequently become unclear where multiple security actors operate within the same territory. Moreover, local legitimacy does not automatically guarantee democratic accountability; community-supported groups may exercise coercive authority in ways that exclude vulnerable groups or political opponents.

The findings therefore reveal a central paradox: weak formal security provision can stimulate community resilience while simultaneously fragmenting legitimate authority and

accountability. Community policing offers a potentially constructive pathway by integrating local knowledge with accountable state institutions rather than transferring coercive responsibilities entirely to communities.

Nigeria is consequently experiencing an increasingly plural security order, whose democratic implications depend on whether community-based capacities complement legitimate state institutions or increasingly substitute for them. Integration within rights-based and accountable governance may strengthen democratic resilience; institutional substitution risks deepening legitimacy deficits and unequal citizenship.

7. Discussion of Findings

The findings suggest that persistent insecurity has become a stress test of both legitimate state authority and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The evidence does not support a deterministic proposition that insecurity inevitably produces democratic breakdown. Rather, its political consequences depend on the state's ability to convert coercive capacity into effective, legitimate and accountable protection. This distinction is theoretically important. State Legitimacy Theory explains why persistent failure to protect citizens, corruption and weak institutional performance can diminish trust in public authority, while Democratic Consolidation Theory explains why declining legitimacy, restricted participation and weakened accountability can undermine the substantive foundations of democracy even when elections and constitutional institutions survive (Levi et al., 2009; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The discussion therefore advances one central argument: Nigeria's democratic vulnerability arises less from insecurity alone than from the interaction between insecurity, state legitimacy and the quality of democratic governance.

7.1 Security Provision as a Test of State Legitimacy

The first and most consequential finding is that security provision has become a critical basis upon which Nigerians evaluate the legitimacy of the state. Weber's (1978) conception of legitimate authority implies that political authority cannot depend indefinitely on the capacity to command or coerce; it must be regarded as rightful. Levi et al. (2009) develop this argument by demonstrating that legitimacy is strengthened where

citizens perceive government as trustworthy, effective and procedurally fair. Applied to Nigeria, this means that the state's legitimacy is tested not merely by its possession of military and police institutions, but by whether those institutions actually provide citizens with credible and equitable protection.

The evidence strongly supports this interpretation. Afrobarometer (2023) reported that 61% of Nigerians surveyed felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhoods and 51% feared crime in their homes; only 21% considered government effective in reducing crime, while only 15% expressed trust in the police. Moreover, 73% perceived most or all police officials as corrupt. These figures are significant because they reveal a gap between formal state authority and experienced state protection. The problem is therefore not simply that insecurity persists, but that repeated failures of protection can alter citizens' beliefs about whether public authority is competent and deserving of trust.

This interpretation is reinforced by more recent evidence. Afrobarometer (2024) findings show that only 64% of Nigerians regard democracy as preferable to any other form of government, while 80% reported that corruption had increased over the preceding year. The findings should not be interpreted as evidence of democratic rejection; rather, they suggest that support for democracy can coexist with dissatisfaction with the institutions through which democracy is experienced. This distinction is central to democratic consolidation.

The problem is further complicated by the multidimensional nature of state capacity. Hanson and Sigman (2021) distinguish state capacity into interrelated coercive, administrative and extractive dimensions. Nigeria's experience demonstrates why this distinction matters: expanding military operations cannot by itself compensate for deficiencies in policing, justice administration, local governance and institutional accountability. A state may possess substantial coercive capacity while remaining comparatively weak in the administrative capacities required to convert security expenditure into reliable everyday protection.

The implication is therefore clear: state legitimacy depends not simply on the state's ability to use force, but on its ability to protect institutions that citizens regard as competent, fair and accountable.

7.2 From Legitimacy Deficits to Democratic Vulnerability

The second finding concerns the consequences of weakened legitimacy for democratic consolidation. Linz and Stepan (1996) conceptualise consolidation as extending beyond the survival of democratic institutions to the institutionalisation of democratic rules and the acceptance of democracy as the normal framework for political competition. From this perspective, Nigeria's uninterrupted civilian rule since 1999 demonstrates democratic continuity, but continuity alone cannot establish substantive consolidation.

Persistent insecurity can progressively weaken the conditions required for consolidation by restricting participation, displacing populations, undermining confidence in institutions and increasing citizens' dependence on coercive or informal forms of authority. The resulting problem is therefore cumulative rather than episodic. A violent incident may disrupt an election; prolonged insecurity can alter the relationship between citizens and the state itself.

This distinction is particularly important because Nigeria continues to possess functioning democratic institutions. Freedom House (2024) currently classifies Nigeria as “Partly Free”, awarding it 44/100 and noting both continuing political competition and serious restrictions associated with insecurity, human-rights abuses and weaknesses in civil liberties. The appropriate interpretation is therefore neither that Nigerian democracy has collapsed nor that it has remained unaffected. Rather, institutional continuity coexists with substantive democratic vulnerability.

Recent Afrobarometer (2024) evidence reinforces this interpretation. Despite dissatisfaction with government performance, 64% of Nigerians in the 2024 survey still preferred democracy to other forms of government. This suggests that citizens may continue to value democratic rule while becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the state's capacity to deliver its substantive benefits. The theoretical implication is important: democratic consolidation can weaken from within even when popular commitment to democracy remains comparatively resilient.

7.3 Democratic Resilience Does Not Equal Democratic Consolidation

The persistence of constitutional government, elections, opposition and civil society demonstrates that Nigerian democracy possesses significant resilience. Contemporary

resilience scholarship conceptualises democratic resilience as the capacity of democratic institutions and actors to withstand or reverse pressures that could otherwise produce democratic decline (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Boese et al., 2021). Nigeria's experience is consistent with this distinction.

The continued operation of competitive political institutions, civil society and media demonstrates that persistent insecurity has not produced complete institutional closure. Freedom House's (2024) current assessment similarly recognises continuing political competition and a vibrant media environment, even while documenting serious constraints and abuses.

However, resilience should not be mistaken for consolidation. A political system may survive repeated crises without necessarily strengthening the institutional norms that make democracy durable. In Nigeria, elections continue, but insecurity can make political participation more costly and uneven; civil society remains active, but journalists and activists may face intimidation; and security institutions remain operational, but public trust in the police remains exceptionally low. Afrobarometer (2023) evidence that only 13% of Nigerians regarded their police as often or always professional and respectful of citizens' rights is particularly revealing.

The analytical distinction can therefore be expressed as:

persistent insecurity → institutional stress → adaptation and democratic survival → resilience without necessarily achieving consolidation.

This explains why Nigeria can remain electorally democratic while simultaneously experiencing weaknesses in legitimacy, accountability and effective citizenship.

7.4 The Security–Legitimacy Paradox

The findings further reveal a security–legitimacy paradox. The state requires coercive capacity to protect citizens and preserve public order, yet coercive authority can itself become a source of illegitimacy when it is experienced as corrupt, abusive or unaccountable. The problem is therefore not whether Nigeria should possess strong security institutions, but what institutional conditions make coercive capacity democratically legitimate.

The empirical evidence is particularly striking in relation to policing. Afrobarometer (2025) found that 75% of Nigerians who sought police assistance reported paying a bribe, while 55% of those who encountered police in other circumstances reported similar experiences. It also found substantial perceptions of excessive police force. Such findings illustrate Levi et al.'s (2009) proposition that legitimacy depends partly on perceptions of procedural fairness and governmental trustworthiness. When citizens encounter the state through institutions perceived as corrupt or abusive, coercive encounters can weaken rather than reinforce voluntary compliance.

This creates two distinct pathways:

Security failure → inadequate protection → declining trust → legitimacy deficit.

Coercive overreach → perceived abuse/injustice → declining trust → legitimacy deficit.

The alternative is:

Effective and accountable protection → perceived competence and fairness → institutional trust → stronger democratic legitimacy.

The implication is that security effectiveness should not be measured solely by operational outcomes, such as arrests, military deployments or territorial control. It should also include whether security institutions operate lawfully, fairly and accountably. This interpretation is consistent with Hanson and Sigman's (2021) multidimensional understanding of state capacity: coercive capacity is only one component of effective statehood.

7.5 Security Governance and the Quality of Democratic Consolidation

The findings ultimately indicate that security governance constitutes a substantive dimension of democratic consolidation, rather than a policy domain external to it. Democratic consolidation requires institutions capable of managing conflict and insecurity without undermining the rights, accountability and participation that give democratic authority its legitimacy.

This is particularly important in Nigeria because security pressures increasingly intersect with political and civic life. Freedom House (2026) recent assessments continue to identify insecurity, restrictions on civil liberties, harassment of journalists and abuses by military

and law-enforcement agencies as significant constraints on democratic rights. At the same time, the persistence of civil society and political competition demonstrates that these pressures have not eliminated democratic contestation.

The resulting relationship is therefore conditional rather than deterministic. Security pressures can weaken democracy where they overwhelm institutional capacity, erode legitimacy and restrict participation. Conversely, effective and accountable governance can convert security challenges into opportunities for institutional adaptation and renewed public confidence.

The study consequently proposes that the relationship between insecurity and democratic consolidation should be understood through three governance trajectories:

1. Security failure - inadequate protection weakens state legitimacy and encourages dependence on alternative security providers.
2. Coercive overreach - excessive or unaccountable security responses may generate short-term control but weaken rights, trust and legitimacy.
3. Legitimate security governance — effective protection combined with accountability, legality, civilian oversight and responsiveness strengthens institutional trust and democratic resilience.

7.6 Theoretical Contribution

The principal theoretical contribution is therefore to connect State Legitimacy Theory and Democratic Consolidation Theory through security governance. State Legitimacy Theory explains why the state's capacity to protect citizens and exercise authority fairly affects willingness to trust and accept public authority (Levi et al., 2009). Democratic Consolidation Theory explains why those legitimacy conditions matter for the durability of democratic institutions, participation and accountability (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The Nigerian case demonstrates that the relationship is neither “insecurity causes democratic collapse” nor “democratic continuity demonstrates consolidation.” Instead, persistent insecurity produces institutional stress whose democratic consequences depend on the legitimacy and quality of the state's response. Nigeria has demonstrated

considerable resilience; Afrobarometer (2024) reports that a majority still prefer democracy—yet continuing insecurity, low institutional trust and weaknesses in rights protection expose substantial vulnerabilities.

The broader theoretical argument is consequently that democratic consolidation under conditions of persistent insecurity depends on the state's ability to reconcile protection with legitimacy. A democratic state must be strong enough to protect citizens but sufficiently constrained to prevent that strength from becoming arbitrary power. The decisive issue is therefore not the maximisation of coercive capacity, but the construction of legitimate security governance in which state capability, accountability, public trust and democratic participation reinforce rather than undermine one another.

8. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that persistent insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a security-sector problem but a governance problem affecting state legitimacy, accountability, rights protection, citizen trust and political participation. Where insecurity coincides with ineffective protection, weak justice and unresponsive institutions, democratic legitimacy may deteriorate even when formal institutions remain intact, producing democratic resilience alongside substantive vulnerability.

The findings further show that state responses are as consequential as insecurity itself. Although coercive measures may be necessary against serious threats, excessive, opaque or unaccountable securitisation can restrict civic freedoms, weaken oversight and erode public trust. Thus, both inadequate protection and unaccountable coercion can undermine democratic consolidation. Effective security must therefore be distinguished from security based primarily on coercion.

The growing role of vigilantes, community security groups and traditional authorities demonstrates the pluralisation of Nigeria's security governance. While these arrangements can strengthen local protection, weak regulation may fragment authority and accountability. The central conclusion is that the democratic effects of insecurity are mediated by the quality of security governance. Effective, lawful, inclusive and accountable security provision can strengthen legitimacy and democratic resilience, whereas ineffective or opaque governance can deepen institutional distrust.

Nigeria's democratic future therefore depends not simply on suppressing violence but on building capable, legitimate, accountable and responsive security institutions that reconcile effective protection with constitutional restraint, civilian oversight, human-rights protection and citizen participation.

9. Policy Implications

The central policy implication is that Nigeria cannot sustainably address persistent insecurity through coercive capacity alone; security effectiveness must be embedded within legitimate, accountable and participatory governance. Inadequate protection can weaken state legitimacy, while excessive or poorly regulated coercion may further erode public trust, civic freedoms and democratic accountability. Security-sector reform should therefore strengthen civilian oversight, institutional coordination and accountability. Parliamentary scrutiny, judicial review and independent investigation of abuses should be reinforced, alongside clearer coordination among the military, police, intelligence agencies and subnational authorities. Security operations should remain subject to constitutional mandates, proportionality and transparent rules of engagement.

Security governance should also be integrated with responsive public administration and state legitimacy. Security interventions should be accompanied by accessible justice, essential services, livelihoods and effective local administration, particularly in communities disproportionately affected by violence. Where citizens experience the state primarily through coercive operations without adequate protection or public services, durable legitimacy is unlikely.

Community-based security arrangements also require structured regulation. Vigilantes, traditional institutions and community-security organisations can contribute local knowledge, early warning and protection, but clearly defined mandates, training, reporting mechanisms and human-rights safeguards are necessary to prevent parallel and unaccountable coercive authority.

Ultimately, Nigeria should move from predominantly reactive security management towards preventive and accountable security governance, integrating early warning, mediation, community engagement, proportionate intervention and post-conflict recovery. The policy objective should be a legitimate security state capable of protecting citizens and

maintaining public order while remaining constitutionally constrained, publicly accountable and responsive to those it governs.

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