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Democracy and Security Governance in Nigeria: Looking Beyond the State

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Introduction

Democracy, governance and security is hugely influenced by politics, and politics is framed as one that dominates everyday living of the people and is driven by the authoritative allocation of resources. One of the central hallmarks of Nigeria's commitment to democracy is the reference to "[we the people](#)", as an expression of the people's collective will to build a country where the core values of the rule of law and direct people's participation in governance is guaranteed. In reality, a dominant feature of the country's plural setting from independence in 1960 to date is the dominance of primordial sentiments that are rooted in sub or micro nationalism over national identity. Although, the Nigerian state is supposed to represent the legal basis for sovereignty, authority and legitimacy, loyalty to sub-national identities continue to threaten the legitimacy and existence of the state. The growing influence of [centrifugal forces](#) - religion, ethnicity and regionalism continue to weaken the nation and state building project of the country. This accounts for the rising spate of discontents in the country. In a significant way, these identities systematically define and frame the question of cooperation and competition amongst the diverse groups that make up what is known as the Nigerian federation.

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Democracy and Security Governance in Nigeria

Democracy is a governing system based on majoritarian rule and popular participation. Although democracy has become globally fashionable, current, and mainstream, that does not necessarily purport that it is the [best system of government](#). Over the years, democracy has been associated with sundry excesses and inadequacies which have left people to become not only critical but also skeptical about its essence and promise. In the words of John Adams, '[democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself](#)'. The beauty of democracy, however, is that it places in people's hand the power and agency to determine and control their political destiny. Part of this civic privilege is evidenced in the stakes that the citizenry wields regarding security governance.

Security governance is the process of steering the security affairs of the state. Security is the essence of the state, and the reason for its existence. Hence, security governance is indispensable to statecraft. Security governance in a democracy is a state-society partnership, whereby the government and the citizenry are joint stakeholders; both the government and the governed are mutually reinforcing, towards the protection of life and safeguarding the nation. According to Nelson Mandela, '[safety and security don't just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and public investment](#)'. Actualising this collective accord and investment is a core concern of security governance in a democratic polity.

The character of security governance in Nigeria reflects the praetorian tendency of the country's national security architecture. This invariably is a consequence of the country's history of protracted military rule. Another important attribute of security governance in Nigeria is the syndrome of politicization of security and securitization of politics. The state decides what constitutes a threat to national security and the requisite response to that effect. Political considerations often shape the state's decision on what constitutes a threat to national security.

Governance, including security governance is (and should be) a partnership between the government and the governed. The reality in Nigeria is that there has been heavy reliance on the formal institutions and mechanisms of state security. Little efforts have been made to explore the potentials and prospects of non-state alternatives in dealing with national security issues. The effectiveness and adequacy of the state-dominant security governance paradigm in Nigeria has been subject to debates. It has often been ad hoc, reactive, and lethargic in responding to the national security concerns. This, among others, justifies '[a look beyond the state' in national security dispensation in Nigeria's ability to meet its security demands](#).

Overview and Nature of Nigeria's Security Situation

National security architecture refers to a country's formal mechanisms of security dispensation. It includes the structures, institutions, actors, as well as operational frameworks by which a country seeks to set and achieve its national security. Nigeria's national security architecture comprises of several institutions and systems, namely the military, paramilitary organs, the police force, anti-graft agencies, the intelligence agencies, and allied institutions within the defence and internal security setups.

The current security situation in Nigeria has been best described as a '[complex threat scenario](#)', and a huge policing problem. No part of the country is exempt from the prevailing malaise of insecurity. The Northeast region still grapples with the menace of Boko Haram insurgency/ terrorism. The Northwest is afflicted by the [orgy of violent criminality](#), as the epicentre of organised criminal armed groups that operate under the [cliché of bandits](#).

1 - 1 - An earlier version of this analysis was presented as a public lecture at the Federal University of Lafia, Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria, during the Launch of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), 11th December, 2023.

The North Central is entrapped in an intractable morass of [farmer-herder conflict](#) in addition to the incidences of [internecine communal disturbances](#). The Southeast is enmeshed in widespread conflagrations associated with [neo-secessionist militancy](#) of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB). The Niger Delta remains notorious for piracy, oil theft, cultism, militancy, and allied dimensions of petro-rentier violence/criminality. The Southwest is threatened by a [spate ritual violence](#), amid the rising waves of urban and subaltern criminality.

Racked by an unending spiral of violent ethnic, communal, resource and religious conflicts in different parts of the country, as well as rising crime rate in major cities and towns, Nigeria is in dire need of the requisite conditions of stability and security to achieve the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Linked to this condition of insecurity is the rise of household poverty and the general deterioration of individual welfare, particularly among the most vulnerable segments of the population. In locations of endemic insecurity, huge personal incomes, savings, investments and entitlements of poor people and low-income earners in both the formal and informal sectors have been lost to the destruction associated with violent conflicts (arson, mass murder, looting, etc) and organised crime (armed robbery, kidnapping, fraud, etc).

The prevailing security threats in Nigeria are not only complex, and dynamic, but they intersect and converge into a nebulous mix that conflates understanding and remediation. The gamut of national security challenges in Nigeria puts pressure on the already structurally challenged and overwhelmed national security architecture. The country's national security architecture has been characterized as centralist, and 'commandist', designed to work as a closed and 'restricted' guardian that administers security by command-and-control approach. This has had significant implications for security governance in the country.

In the Shadow of Peacelessness

What does the absence of peace really mean, in the context of democratic governance in Nigeria? To what extent can the presence of, or absence of peace affect the process and outcome of elections, in the search for democratic governance? One of the key manifestations of peacelessness lies in the dwindling citizen's trust of Nigeria's public institutions. In the context of Nigeria's election management institutions, security agencies and the judiciary have been on trial in the court of public opinion regarding their roles in the electoral process. Reflections on the state of peace in the context of future elections in the country, must take into consideration the extent to which these institutions are able to reclaim public trust towards guaranteeing credible and peaceful elections. The judiciary as "the last hope of the common man", a popular cliché in Nigeria, represents one of the key pillars for electoral justice, which the people look up to. In this sense, the judiciary should not be for those that can purchase its "justice", in an era of what has been described as [judicial mercenaries](#).

If peaceful elections constitute one of the key pillars for the credibility of elections in Nigeria, the expectation by the people is that it should be anchored on certain parameters, which becomes the principal indices for measuring peacefulness or the absence of it. Such indices include respect for the rights of the people to elect their leaders without any form of hindrance; level playing field for all political parties and their candidates to operate without intimidation; respect for civil society as bridge builders between the people and the state; respect for the judiciary as the guarantor of electoral justice among others; as well as fairness and justice on the part of the judiciary.

Many of the spaces in which Nigerians congregate do not serve as nodes for aggregating their aspirations and demands, which exerts pressure on government (in a civic sense) to achieve them. This results in a dearth of accountability-demanding relationships. Rather, communities seek and engage government for services (such as improved health services, water, education, housing)

on the basis of patronage (demanding allocation and access to services based to their lineage or other kin relationships), or welfare (charitable or religious obligations to provide for the less fortunate).

[State fragility](#) and the associated oligopolies of violence and insecurity represents the most pervasive and chronic feature of the Nigerian state. The Nigerian society is currently characterised by the dualism of the state, in which the formal structures of central authority coexist with non-state institutions of governance, highlighting the remoteness and artificiality of the state in meeting the aspirations of its people. In response to this reality, people continue to disengage themselves from the state in search for [alternative means](#) of security and welfare. This disengagement reinforces the creation of a 'parallel society', which offers alternative outlets for people to address their needs outside the state. This applies very much to their welfare and security needs, where the failure of the state to meet these needs, justifies the recourse to non-state entities.

The management of internal security is primary the duties of the Nigeria Police Force as captured in Section 215(3) of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, which provided that the police is [charged with the maintenance and securing of public safety and public order](#). Section 217(2)(c) of the Constitution of the Nigeria also provides for the Nigerian military to act in aid of civil authorities. Under such circumstance, the military conducts internal security operations with the goal of containing conflicts and criminality across the country. The militarization of the security response under the guise of [internal security management](#), appears to be locked in place by [several factors](#), including a culture that does not prioritize the protection of citizens; [poverty of policy imagination; poor training, capacity, orientation of security staff; and failures in the coordination of security forces](#) (notably between the army and the police).

Beyond the State: Towards a New Paradigm of Security Governance in Nigeria

Nigeria's national security architecture is grossly overwhelmed and overstretched because of the complexities of [national security challenges](#). The state's coercive and affective competencies are increasingly eroded amid the rising organized non-state violence in many parts of the country. There is, therefore, a need to explore possible and viable non-state avenues for security governance to meet the demands of the challenging situation. Essentially, repositioning security in Nigeria will entail a deliberate effort to depoliticize national security, reform the national security architecture, and de-secure the processes of security governance.

Security governance is a collective public responsibility in which the state and the civil society are mutual stakeholders. Security governance in Nigeria has been so disproportionately [state-dominant and government-focused](#). A paradigmatic shift from this approach requires a conscious and deliberate effort to mainstream non-state solutions and strategies in national security dispensation. This would entail several measures that include, but not limited to, the following:

- I. Leverage the role of Think-Tanks: University-based think-tanks, as well as other centres of learning should be well resourced – financial and technical, to provide relevant technocratic insights to inform and guide security policy and strategy. Such outfits need to be supported and partnered by the government to promote the course of security governance.
- II. Guarantee People's Participation in Governance: Civic vigilance and active participation in decision making processes relating to the choice of leaders is an important component of resilience, which people must adopt. The search for competent leaders that can manage diversity, as well as foster equity and inclusion, represents a major catalyst for building cohesion and unity. This is an important pathway for addressing grievances associated with exclusion, marginalization, or inequity, which over the years have been the primary drivers of hate and violent confrontations amongst people.

- III. Mainstreaming Gender in Democracy and Security Governance: Research, policy and programmes with strong focus on gender should be prioritized, as a basis for the enthronelement of an inclusive society that recognizes the critical role of mainstreaming gender in governance and the security sector. In line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, as well as the National Action Plan and State Action Plans on UNSCR 1325, the women involvement in security related decision-making processes should be on the front burner of public administration, in order to give women a voice and platform for positive impact in the country's democracy.
- IV. Support community-based peace infrastructure. The Federal, States and Local Governments, through their relevant agencies, should strengthen partnership with traditional authorities, faith-based institutions, women and youth groups, civil society organisations and the media to enhance existing community-based peace infrastructures and conflict early warning systems. These should be integrated into the national/State security architecture to respond and mitigate the effects of structural causes of violent conflicts and the varied threats to human security in the region.
- V. Develop a Multi-Sectoral and Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Crisis Response: The security situation in Nigeria is one that is complex and multifaceted. From a security governance standpoint, experiences across the country, as per government's response to crisis suggests that an approach which relies primarily on a security response will fail. The need for government, in concert with the academia, civil society and development partners to develop an integrated that leverages sectoral and disciplinary capacities is critical.

Conclusion

Security governance in a democracy is a state-society partnership in pursuit of the ultimate common good – security of lives, livelihoods, and shared heritage. Security governance in Nigeria has been more state-dominant and less citizen participatory. The potentials of the non-state sector have been largely under-explored or neglected. The exigency of repositioning Nigeria's national security architecture in response to the rising national security challenges has necessitated a paradigm shift in the country's security governance. Such a shift, among other things, emphasizes the need for a pragmatically devolved national security architecture that looks beyond the state and its agents as the fulcrum of security dispensation.

About CORN West Africa

Conflict Research Network West Africa (CORN West Africa) is a research ecosystem for researchers based in institutions in West Africa who are working in the field of peace, security, and political violence. The Network mobilises researchers to conduct cutting-edge research on peace, security, violent conflicts, and political violence. CORN West Africa facilitates knowledge and capacity exchange between and among members of the ecosystem, and translate findings of research conducted by members of the ecosystem into actionable policy prescriptions for agencies, and organisations working on peacebuilding, conflict management and security in West Africa.

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