**RULE OF LAW: SAFEGUARDING CIVIL LIBERTIES AMID INSECURITY IN NIGERIA**

*This work examines the complex relationship between Nigeria’s security challenges and the protection of civil liberties within the framework of the rule of law. It explores how ongoing insecurity, including terrorism, insurgency, and inter-communal violence, has prompted increased militarization and legal repressions, often undermining fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, assembly, and personal liberty. The work highlights critical legal and institutional gaps, including vague legislation, weak judicial independence, and inadequate oversight mechanisms, which facilitate rights violations and erode public trust. The work further shows the necessity of comprehensive reforms—strengthening judicial independence, legislative oversight, and security sector accountability—to achieve a balanced approach that safeguards both security and civil liberties. Furthermore, it discusses the role of civil society, media, and international actors in advocating for human rights and transparent governance amidst security operations. In furthering recommendations, it includes implementing community-based security initiatives, adopting legal safeguards against abuse, and fostering participatory mechanisms that involve local populations in security policymaking. In submitting its final position, the work shows that upholding the rule of law is essential for long-term stability, democratic consolidation, and respect for human rights in Nigeria. This work underscores that sustainable security can only be achieved through adherence to legal principles, accountability, and the protection of civil liberties in times of crisis.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Rule of law, Civil Liberties, Security Challenges

**1.0 Introduction**

Nigeria faces a multifaceted security crisis characterized by terrorism, insurgency, banditry, and inter-communal violence, which have significantly disrupted socio-economic stability and individual freedoms. In response, the government has often resorted to militarized measures, including extrajudicial actions and restrictive laws, to combat these threats. While such approaches may offer short-term security gains, they also pose serious risks to fundamental civil liberties such as freedom of expression, assembly, and personal liberty.[[1]](#footnote-1) The tension between ensuring national security and upholding human rights has become a central challenge for Nigeria’s democratic governance, raising critical questions about the extent to which security operations can or should be conducted within the boundaries of the rule of law in Nigeria.

This work explores the legal and institutional frameworks governing Nigeria’s approach to security and civil liberties, emphasizing the importance of balancing effective security strategies with the protection of human rights. It looks at the gaps and weaknesses within Nigeria’s legal system—such as vague legislation, judicial limitations, and lack of oversight—that facilitate abuses and undermine public trust. The paper further advocates for comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening judicial independence, legislative oversight, and community participation in security policymaking. In posing its final thesis, this work argues that sustainable peace and democratic stability in Nigeria can only be achieved if security efforts are grounded in respect for the rule of law and fundamental human rights.

**2.1 The Legal Framework of the Rule of Law and Civil Liberties in Nigeria**

Nigeria’s legal framework for the rule of law and civil liberties is primarily anchored in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,[[2]](#footnote-2) which enshrines fundamental rights in Chapter IV by the provisions of sections 33-46 and in other legislation. These provisions guarantee key freedoms, including the right to life, dignity of the human person, personal liberty, fair hearing, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and freedom from discrimination. Additionally, Nigeria is a signatory to international treaties such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR)[[3]](#footnote-3) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),[[4]](#footnote-4) which reinforce these protections. The judiciary, under Section 6 of the Constitution, is empowered to interpret and enforce these rights, ensuring governmental accountability. However, despite these robust legal provisions, enforcement remains inconsistent due to judicial delays, executive interference, and security agencies’ disregard for due process, particularly in cases involving state security.

Beyond constitutional safeguards, Nigeria has enacted laws aimed at protecting civil liberties, such as the Freedom of Information Act of 2011, which promotes government transparency, and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act of 2015, which curbs arbitrary detention. However, counter-terrorism and cybercrime laws—such as the Terrorism (Prevention) Act (2011, amended 2013) and the Cybercrimes Act (2015)—have been criticized for being weaponized to suppress dissent, as seen in cases of arbitrary arrests of activists and journalists under vague "cyberstalking" provisions.[[5]](#footnote-5) While institutions like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and civil society organizations advocate for rights protection, systemic challenges—including police brutality (exemplified by the #EndSARS protests), unlawful military detentions, and restrictive media laws—highlight the gap between legal frameworks and their practical application. Strengthening judicial independence, reforming law enforcement agencies, and ensuring legislative oversight are crucial to bridging this gap and upholding the rule of law in Nigeria.

**2.2 Insecurity in Nigeria as a Threat to Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law**

Nigeria’s escalating insecurity has not only disrupted lives but also severely undermined the civil liberties of citizens. The government’s response, often characterized by heavy-handed military operations, arbitrary arrests, and restrictive laws, has further eroded fundamental rights. For instance, under the guise of combating terrorism, security forces have been accused of extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, and press censorship, as seen in the suppression of protests like #EndSARS and the targeting of journalists critical of state policies.[[6]](#footnote-6) The prolonged state of emergency in regions like the Northeast has led to mass displacements, restricted movement, and suspension of due process, leaving citizens vulnerable to both state and non-state violence.[[7]](#footnote-7) Additionally, laws such as the Cybercrime Act and the Terrorism Prevention Act have been weaponized to stifle dissent, with activists and opposition figures arrested for expressing views deemed threatening to national security.[[8]](#footnote-8) This growing securitization of governance has created an environment where civil liberties are increasingly sacrificed in the name of stability, yet without delivering lasting peace.

The rise of insecurity has also deepened societal divisions, with ethnic and religious profiling becoming common in security operations, further violating citizens' rights to equality and dignity. In the Northwest, banditry has forced thousands into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where reports of sexual violence and lack of legal protections persist. Meanwhile, in the Southeast, military crackdowns on separatist groups have led to widespread human rights abuses, including torture and enforced disappearances.[[9]](#footnote-9) The judiciary, often weakened by executive interference and corruption, struggles to hold perpetrators accountable, leaving victims without redress.

**3.0 Topical Issues on the Rule of Law and Civil Liberties in Nigeria**

The discourse on the rule of law and how it affects civil liberties in Nigeria, amidst growing security threats cannot be done without adequate discourse on certain issues that has consistently permeates the screens of every day Nigerian. Hence, this work will identify these issues and give context to it.

1. **Arbitrary Arrests and Prolonged Detentions**

Arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention significantly undermine both national security and civil liberties in Nigeria. Security agencies, including the police, military, and the Department of State Services (DSS), frequently detain individuals without credible evidence, often under vague laws such as the Terrorism Prevention Act or Cybercrime Act. These practices erode public trust in law enforcement, making communities less willing to cooperate with authorities in combating crime and terrorism. Additionally, prolonged detention without trial—sometimes lasting years—clogs the judicial system, diverting resources from legitimate security threats. When security forces operate outside the rule of law, they inadvertently fuel resentment and radicalization, particularly in conflict-prone regions like the Northeast and Southeast.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rather than enhancing security, arbitrary detentions create a cycle of mistrust, where citizens view security agencies as oppressors rather than protectors, weakening the state’s ability to maintain order effectively.

From a civil liberties perspective, arbitrary arrests violate fundamental rights enshrined in Nigeria’s Constitution and international treaties, including the right to personal liberty, as provided by the provision of section 35 and fair hearing of section 36 of the Constitution. It is further noted that, victims—often journalists, activists, or ordinary citizens—face torture, extortion, and indefinite incarceration without recourse to justice. High-profile cases, such as the prolonged detention of #EndSARS protesters and separatist agitators without trial, demonstrate how state actions intended to curb unrest instead suppress dissent and stifle democratic freedoms.[[11]](#footnote-11) Furthermore, the judiciary’s inability to enforce habeas corpus petitions due to executive interference perpetuates a culture of impunity. When citizens perceive that the legal system cannot protect them, they lose faith in democracy, potentially resorting to self-help or violent resistance.

1. **Press Independence and Executive Interference**

Press freedom in Nigeria faces significant threats due to executive interference, undermining both democracy and national security. The Nigerian media, often regarded as one of the most vibrant in Africa, has increasingly come under attack through restrictive laws, arbitrary arrests of journalists, and internet shutdowns. Laws such as the Cybercrime Act and the proposed "Social Media Bill" have been weaponized to suppress dissent, often under the pretext of curbing fake news and maintaining national security.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, these measures disproportionately target critics of the government, eroding public trust and stifling accountability. When journalists and activists are silenced, corruption and human rights abuses go unchecked, creating an environment where insecurity thrives due to a lack of transparency and public scrutiny.

Executive interference in press freedom also exacerbates Nigeria’s security challenges by limiting the flow of vital information. In conflict zones, reporters face harassment or detention for covering military operations or exposing government failures, leaving citizens uninformed and vulnerable. For instance, the suppression of reports on atrocities committed by security forces or insurgent groups prevents meaningful public debate and policy corrections. Furthermore, when the media is intimidated into self-censorship, extremist groups exploit the information vacuum to spread propaganda, making counterterrorism efforts less effective.[[13]](#footnote-13) A free press is essential for exposing security lapses, mobilizing civic action, and ensuring that security agencies remain accountable—yet executive overreach continues to weaken this critical check on power.

The erosion of press freedom has dire consequences for civil liberties and the rule of law in Nigeria. When the government controls narratives through coercion, it sets a dangerous precedent for authoritarianism, where security concerns justify the suppression of fundamental rights. Citizens’ access to unbiased information is crucial for holding leaders accountable, yet frequent attacks on media houses and journalists create a climate of fear.[[14]](#footnote-14) Without a free press, Nigeria risks descending further into a cycle of repression and insecurity, where neither the government nor armed groups are held to scrutiny. To strengthen both security and civil liberties, Nigeria must uphold press freedom, repeal oppressive laws, and ensure that executive power is exercised within constitutional limits.

1. **The Role of Non-State Actors in Undermining Civil Liberties**

Non-state actors like Boko Haram, armed bandits, and separatist groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have severely undermined Nigeria’s security and eroded civil liberties. Boko Haram’s insurgency in the Northeast has led to widespread violence, displacement, and instability, forcing the government to impose emergency measures that often restrict freedoms. Military operations and counterterrorism laws, such as the Terrorism Prevention Act, have sometimes resulted in extrajudicial arrests, prolonged detentions without trial, and crackdowns on press freedom.[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, armed bandits in the Northwest and Central regions engage in kidnappings, killings, and mass abductions, creating an environment of fear that stifles free movement and economic activities. Separatist movements like IPOB, through their agitation for self-determination, have also triggered heavy-handed government responses, including internet shutdowns and arbitrary arrests, further shrinking civic space. These groups exploit weak governance and socio-economic grievances, but the state’s often militarized approach exacerbates human rights violations, leaving civilians caught between violent extremists and security forces.

The activities of these non-state actors have not only destabilized Nigeria but also led to a troubling erosion of constitutional rights. For instance, under the pretext of combating terrorism, security agencies have been accused of unlawful surveillance, forced disappearances, and suppression of dissent, particularly in regions under conflict. The Cybercrime Act and Social Media Bill have been weaponized to silence critics, while arbitrary bans on protests—such as those seen during the #EndSARS demonstrations—highlight the government’s tendency to prioritize security over civil liberties. Furthermore, vigilante groups and ethnic militias, often formed in response to state failure, operate outside legal frameworks, sometimes committing extrajudicial killings and deepening communal divisions.[[16]](#footnote-16) The cumulative effect is a weakening of public trust in democratic institutions, as citizens perceive both the state and non-state actors as threats to their rights. Without a rights-based approach to security, Nigeria risks descending further into authoritarianism, where counterterrorism measures become tools for repression rather than protection.

1. **Legislative Gaps and Weak Legal Protections**

Nigeria’s legal framework suffers from legislative gaps and weak enforcement mechanisms, which undermine both national security and civil liberties. While laws such as the Terrorism Prevention Act and the Cybercrime Act exist to combat security threats, many are overly broad, vaguely worded, or prone to misuse by state actors.[[17]](#footnote-17) The lack of robust legal safeguards against arbitrary detention—despite constitutional protections—enables security agencies like the police and military to hold suspects indefinitely without trial, particularly in conflict zones like the Northeast. These legislative deficiencies create an environment where security operations often disregard due process, exacerbating public distrust in the state’s ability to fairly balance safety and rights.

Furthermore, weak legal protections embolden impunity, allowing both state and non-state actors to violate civil liberties with little consequence. Security forces frequently invoke national security to justify extrajudicial killings, unlawful surveillance, and forced disappearances, yet accountability mechanisms—such as judicial oversight and independent oversight bodies—remain ineffective. The absence of a comprehensive data protection law, for example, leaves citizens vulnerable to privacy violations by both government and private entities. Similarly, the slow pace of judicial reforms and chronic underfunding of the justice system prolong legal battles, denying victims timely redress. This legislative inertia perpetuates a cycle where security crackdowns intensify public grievances, fueling further unrest. Without urgent legal reforms to strengthen transparency, accountability, and human rights safeguards, Nigeria’s approach to security will continue to undermine the very rule of law it seeks to protect, leaving citizens caught between threats from insurgents and abuses by the state.

1. **Civil Society and Human Rights Advocacy**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights groups in Nigeria have played a crucial role in mediating the tension between national security and civil liberties. Through litigation, advocacy, and public awareness campaigns, groups like the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and Amnesty International Nigeria have challenged draconian security policies that undermine constitutional rights. For instance, they have successfully opposed repressive laws such as the Social Media Bill and the Hate Speech Prohibition Act, which threatened free expression under the guise of national security.[[18]](#footnote-18)

However, human rights defenders often face significant pushback from state authorities, including harassment, arrests, and restrictive legislation like the NGO Regulation Bill. Despite these challenges, CSOs have adopted strategic approaches, such as coalition-building with the media, international partners, and progressive lawmakers, to amplify their advocacy. During the #EndSARS protests against police brutality, civil society groups documented abuses, provided legal aid to victims, and pressured the government to disband the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Their efforts demonstrated that security reforms can be achieved without sacrificing civil liberties, emphasizing accountability and transparency in law enforcement.

**4.1 Comparative Perspectives and Recommendations: Lessons from Other Jurisdictions**

Democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom have faced similar tensions between national security and civil liberties, particularly after major terrorist attacks. In the U.S., the Patriot Act (2001) expanded government surveillance powers, allowing warrantless searches and data collection to combat terrorism. However, this led to backlash over privacy violations, prompting reforms like the USA Freedom Act (2015), which reinstated some judicial oversight.[[19]](#footnote-19) Similarly, the UK’s Terrorism Act (2000, 2006) introduced prolonged detention without trial and broad surveillance measures, but British courts have occasionally pushed back, ruling certain provisions incompatible with human rights law.[[20]](#footnote-20) Both nations demonstrate a cyclical pattern: security crackdowns followed by legal and public resistance to restore civil liberties.

In contrast, Nigeria’s approach has been more heavy-handed, with fewer institutional checks. Laws like the Terrorism Prevention Act (2011) and Cybercrime Act (2015) grant sweeping powers to security agencies, but unlike the U.S. and UK, Nigeria lacks a strong judiciary or legislature to counterbalance executive overreach. The key difference lies in institutional resilience.[[21]](#footnote-21) The U.S. and UK have robust judicial review, independent legislatures, and a free press that challenge security excesses—mechanisms that remain weak in Nigeria. While Western democracies occasionally overreach, they eventually self-correct through legal and public pressure. Nigeria, however, struggles with systemic corruption, politicized security agencies, and a weakened judiciary, making it harder to strike a balance. For Nigeria to better protect civil liberties amid security threats, it must strengthen judicial independence, enforce legislative oversight, and adopt sunset clauses in security laws to prevent permanent erosions of rights.

4.2 **Recommendations for Strengthening the Rule of Law**

The concept for discussion remains a valid discourse, however, there are certain recommendations, if where effected, will help strengthen the rule of law in Nigeria:

1. ***Security Sector Reform***

Security sector reforms can play a pivotal role in safeguarding civil liberties and human rights in Nigeria by ensuring that security agencies operate within the bounds of the law while effectively combating insecurity. A critical step is the professionalization of law enforcement and military institutions through enhanced training on human rights compliance, rule of law principles, and community-oriented policing. Strengthening oversight mechanisms—such as independent civilian review boards, judicial supervision, and legislative accountability—can curb abuses like arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and unlawful detention, which have eroded public trust. Additionally, legal frameworks governing security operations must be revised to clearly define the limits of state power, ensuring that counterterrorism and public safety measures do not infringe on fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech, privacy, and due process.

1. ***Judicial Empowerment***

A robust and independent judiciary is indispensable for safeguarding civil liberties and human rights, particularly in a nation grappling with severe security challenges like Nigeria. Judicial empowerment entails strengthening the capacity, autonomy, and efficiency of the courts to serve as a bulwark against executive overreach and unlawful security measures. This can be achieved through critical reforms, such as ensuring adequate funding for the judiciary, protecting judges from political interference, and enhancing judicial training on human rights law and counterterrorism jurisprudence.

1. **Legislative Reforms**

Legislative reform is a critical tool for promoting civil liberties and human rights in Nigeria, particularly amid escalating security challenges that often lead to government overreach. Currently, many of Nigeria’s security laws, such as the Terrorism Prevention Act and the Cybercrime Act, contain vague provisions that security agencies exploit to suppress dissent, arbitrarily detain suspects, and infringe on privacy rights. To address this, lawmakers should amend these statutes to include clear safeguards against abuse, such as stricter judicial oversight for surveillance, defined limits on detention without trial, and explicit protections for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Additionally, Nigeria’s National Assembly should enact a comprehensive Human Rights Compliance Act that mandates security agencies to operate within legally defined boundaries, with penalties for violations.

1. ***Media Protection***

Protecting the media is crucial for safeguarding civil liberties and human rights in Nigeria, particularly in the face of escalating insecurity. A free and independent press serves as a watchdog, exposing government abuses, security force excesses, and human rights violations—ensuring accountability in counterterrorism and law enforcement operations. However, journalists in Nigeria frequently face harassment, arbitrary arrests, and even violence from state and non-state actors, particularly when reporting on sensitive issues like military operations, corruption, or separatist movements. To strengthen the rule of law, Nigeria must enforce legal protections for journalists, such as the Freedom of Information Act (2011), while repealing repressive laws like the Cybercrimes Act (2015) and proposed social media bills that stifle dissent.

1. ***Community Engagement***

Community engagement serves as a vital mechanism for safeguarding civil liberties and human rights in Nigeria, particularly in the face of escalating insecurity. By fostering inclusive dialogue between security agencies, government institutions, and local populations, trust can be built, reducing the likelihood of rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and unlawful surveillance. Grassroots participation in security initiatives—such as community policing, neighborhood watch programs, and civil-military cooperation—ensures that counterterrorism and law enforcement measures are conducted with respect for due process and human dignity.

**5.0 Conclusion**

The issues surrounding Nigeria's security challenges are deeply intertwined with the respect for civil liberties and the rule of law. While the government is justified in its efforts to combat insecurity, it is imperative that these measures do not come at the expense of fundamental human rights. Strengthening institutional resilience, such as judicial independence and legislative oversight, as well as implementing security sector reforms, are crucial steps toward achieving a balanced approach. Civil society organizations, the media, and international partners play a vital role in monitoring, advocating, and holding authorities accountable to ensure that counter-terrorism efforts align with democratic principles and respect for human dignity.

Nigeria's path to stability and development hinges on its ability to uphold the rule of law and protect civil liberties even in times of crisis. Building trust between security agencies and communities through participatory security initiatives can foster a more effective and rights-respecting response to insecurity. By ensuring that legal frameworks are robust, enforcement mechanisms are transparent, and abuses are met with accountability, Nigeria can create an environment where security measures reinforce rather than undermine democratic values. This comprehensive commitment to balancing safety with liberty will be essential for sustainable peace and progress in the country.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSANT**

1. How can Nigeria effectively balance the need for national security with the protection of civil liberties?
2. What legal reforms are most urgently needed to prevent rights violations during security operations?
3. In what ways has the current legal framework facilitated extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, or prolonged detentions?
4. How can judicial independence be strengthened to hold security agencies accountable?
5. What role should civil society, media, and international organizations play in safeguarding human rights amid insecurity?
6. How effective are existing oversight mechanisms, such as the National Human Rights Commission, in monitoring security abuses?
7. What lessons can Nigeria learn from other democratic nations like the US and UK regarding balancing security and civil liberties?
8. How can community-based security initiatives contribute to long-term peace and respect for human rights?
9. What safeguards can be implemented in security laws to ensure sunset clauses and prevent abuse of power?
10. How does the militarization of security strategies impact citizens’ trust in government and law enforcement institutions?
11. What specific legal protections should be enacted to shield journalists and activists from harassment and violence?
12. How does insecurity affect vulnerable populations, such as internally displaced persons, and what legal protections are necessary for their rights?
13. To what extent does systemic corruption and politicization weaken Nigeria’s judiciary, and how can this challenge be addressed?
14. What strategies can be employed to enhance community participation in security policymaking and oversight?
15. How can Nigeria create a sustainable framework that ensures both effective security measures and the upholding of long-term democratic principles?
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2. Which will herein be referred to as “The Constitution” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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