

Politicization of the Security System: The Nigerian Experience in the Fourth Republic

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ABSTRACT

Security is the bedrock of any society, it serves as an avenue that brings the needed development. This is on account of the fact that, no country can achieve the needed progress without stable security system. The security agencies are expected to perform their duty freely without aligning to a particular selfish interest. This article examines the politicization of Nigeria's security apparatus in the Fourth Republic, exploring its implications for governance, democracy, and national stability. By delving into historical antecedents, contemporary cases, and theoretical frameworks, qualitative research design is utilized in this study, relevant documentary sources were also utilized. The study found that political interference undermines security, fosters corruption, and weakens public trust. Drawing on primary and secondary data, the study provides policy recommendations to depoliticize security institutions.

Keywords: Politicization, Security, Nigeria, Fourth Republic, Governance, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

Security is the bedrock of stable governance and an essential function of the modern state. In democracies, security institutions such as the armed forces, police, intelligence services, and paramilitary agencies are expected to operate under the rule of law, serve the public interest, and maintain a clear separation from partisan politics. However, when the boundaries between state security apparatus and political interests become blurred, the term *politicization of the security system* becomes glaring. Politicization means that security institutions are used or influenced by political actors to serve partisan objectives rather than the common good of the masses.

In the context of the Nigerian Fourth Republic (which began in 1999), the phenomenon of politicizing security institutions has emerged as a critical challenge. The Fourth Republic promised a new democratic dawn after decades of military rule, raising hopes for professional, impartial, and accountable security services (Yagboyaju, 2011). Yet, the Nigerian experience has been fraught with episodes where security agencies have been deployed for electoral manipulation, suppression of opposition, selective enforcement of laws, patronage-driven security appointments, and institutional capture by political elites, all with the intent of serving the interest of political class.

The historical context of Nigeria is germane for understanding how politicization took root. Decades of military rule created institutional legacies whereby the armed forces and other security agencies were deeply embedded in governance and political control. The transition to civilian democratic rule carried over many of these legacies: centralized command structures, weak civilian oversight, blurred civil–military boundaries, and a propensity for using security forces for internal control rather than external defence (Matfess, 2016). In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the politicization of the security system manifests at several levels. First, through command and appointment structures: political office-holders frequently appoint loyalists to key security posts, undermining meritocratic professionalism and chain of command integrity. Second, through operational

deployment: security forces are often deployed during elections or political crises in ways that favour the ruling party or suppress opposition groups (see Frontiers article on security challenges and elections in Nigeria, 2025). Third, through institutional capture: resources, intelligence, and enforcement powers may be directed at political rivals rather than security threats, thereby reducing public trust and institutional legitimacy. Fourth, through accountability deficits: oversight mechanisms remain weak, enabling impunity and the entrenchment of partisan uses of security (Abdulrasheed, 2021).

The consequences of this politicization are multiple and severe. For one, the capacity of security institutions to respond to genuine threats is degraded. When resources are diverted for political ends and institutional priorities skewed toward regime protection, operational efficiency declines. Insurgencies such as that waged by Boko Haram in the northeast, the militancy in the Niger Delta, and the rise of banditry and kidnapping across the northwest have been exacerbated by institutional weaknesses, partisan interference, and lack of strategic focus (Matfess, 2016). Furthermore, politicization undermines democratic consolidation. Democracies depend on impersonal, impartial institutions that citizens trust to treat all groups equally. When security institutions become aligned with the political interests of a regime or an elite faction, they lose legitimacy (Abdulrasheed, 2021; Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2018). This erosion of legitimacy fuels public cynicism, weakens social contract relations, and may lead to backlash in the form of non-state actors taking up arms or communities forming vigilante groups, further complicating the security environment.

Additionally, the relationship between governance, development, and security is adversely affected. The Fourth Republic has seen persistent linkage between insecurity and under-development. For example, insecurity increases costs for investment, reduces government capacity for social spending, and diverts budgets toward security rather than development. Conversely, weak governance, corruption, and poor institutional capacity provide fertile ground for insecurity (Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2018; Agbaenyi & Ezeanya, 2022). Therefore, a focused study of how the security system's politicization has unfolded in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is imperative. Such an analysis should examine: the structural and constitutional features that have enabled politicization (for example centralisation of the police at the federal level, ambiguous concept of indigeneity, and overlapping land-tenure systems) (Matfess, 2016); the procedural mechanisms (appointments, deployments, oversight) by which political influences permeate the security sector; empirical cases (electoral security deployment, militia co-option, intelligence utilisation); and the implications for both state security performance and democratic governance.

Thus, the Nigerian experience in the Fourth Republic reveals that sustainable national security cannot be achieved when institutions responsible for order and protection are routinely weaponised for partisan ends. Reversing such trends requires institutional reforms enhancing civilian oversight, ensuring merit-based appointments, insulating operational decisions from political interference, and fostering professional norms within the security services. By doing so, Nigeria can strengthen both its democratic foundations and its capacity to secure citizens and territory effectively.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This section reviews relevant concepts and empirical studies that bothers on the issue under investigation. This is necessary to showcase the true meaning of relevant concepts used in the work as well as the empirical studies that will provide the gap in the literature, which justify the direction of the paper.

Concept of Security

Security is widely regarded as one of the most fundamental prerequisites for human survival, societal stability, and state legitimacy. Traditionally, security was conceptualized through a *state-centric and militaristic lens*, focusing on the protection of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime stability against external threats (Wolfers, 1952). This classical realist perspective views the military as the primary guarantor of national survival in an anarchic international system. However, contemporary scholarship argues that such a narrow conception fails to address the evolving range of threats confronting modern societies.

The post-Cold War era ushered in a broader and more inclusive understanding of security one that shifts the referent object from the state to individuals and communities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) introduced the concept of *human security*, emphasizing protection from economic deprivation, health vulnerability, political oppression, and communal violence. This expanded framework recognizes that insecurity can emerge from internal governance failures, poverty, terrorism, organized crime, environmental degradation, and social injustice not only from interstate war.

Additionally, critical security studies question the power dynamics embedded in security practices, arguing that security may be used as a tool for legitimizing state coercion and suppressing dissent (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Thus, security is increasingly viewed as multidimensional encompassing political, economic, social, environmental, and cybersecurity concerns. Overall, contemporary conceptualizations recognize security as a continuum involving both state capacity and human well-being. Effective security provision requires balancing state protection with democratic governance, respect for human rights, and community resilience.

The Concept of Security Politicization

The politicization of security refers to the process by which state security apparatuses are manipulated to serve the political interests of dominant elites, parties, or individuals, rather than the collective security of the citizenry. This phenomenon blurs the lines between national interest and partisan objectives, often undermining democratic principles and fostering authoritarian tendencies (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). At its core, security politicization occurs when security issues are elevated from normal political debate to matters of existential threat, thereby justifying extraordinary measures. The Copenhagen School of Security Studies conceptualizes this as "securitization," wherein political actors frame certain issues as urgent security threats to bypass normal political processes (Buzan et al., 1998). In the Nigerian context, this often involves framing political opposition, dissent, or even social protests as threats to national security, thus legitimizing heavy-handed responses.

In another development, Wilkinson (2004), political elites in fragile democracies often rely on the security sector to maintain power, especially when facing credible electoral challenges. The security apparatus becomes an extension of the ruling party, utilized to intimidate opposition, suppress dissent, and manipulate electoral outcomes. This practice is particularly evident in countries with weak institutional checks and balances, where security chiefs are beholden to political patrons rather than constitutional mandates (Luckham, 2003). Similarly, Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou (1999) argue that in post-colonial African states, the politicization of security is deeply embedded in the "criminalization of the state." They contend that security services are co-opted into networks of patronage and rent-seeking, transforming them into tools for personal enrichment and political survival rather than public protection.

Furthermore, Nathan (2007) emphasizes that the politicization of security institutions compromises their professionalism, erodes public trust, and ultimately weakens the state's capacity to manage genuine threats. When security agencies become partisans in political contests, they lose their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, creating an environment conducive to violence and instability. In the Nigerian experience, scholars like Akinrinade and Owoeye (2012) assert that the military's historical involvement in governance has had lingering effects on civilian control of the security sector. Civilian regimes in the Fourth Republic have struggled to assert independent oversight, leading to the frequent instrumentalization of security forces for political ends.

Additionally, scholars like Abrahamsen and Williams (2007) introduce the concept of "global security assemblages," where domestic politicization of security intersects with global counter-terrorism frameworks. In Nigeria, this dynamic is evident in how the government securitized the Boko Haram insurgency to secure international military assistance, while simultaneously using the conflict as a political tool domestically (Olojo, 2020). Added to the above is the view of Ayoade (2008) who contends that the politicization of Nigeria's security sector is symptomatic of broader governance deficits, particularly the absence of political

accountability and the personalization of state institutions. This personalist approach undermines institutional autonomy and professionalism, rendering security agencies vulnerable to manipulation during electoral cycles and periods of political unrest.

In a nutshell, the politicization of security transforms neutral institutions into instruments of power consolidation. This phenomenon not only jeopardizes civil liberties but also delegitimizes the state's capacity to provide security in an impartial and effective manner (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001). The Nigerian experience offers a vivid illustration of these dynamics, with repeated episodes of security politicization undermining both democratic consolidation and national stability.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the politicization of Nigeria's security system in the Fourth Republic (1999–present). The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex socio-political processes, institutional behaviors, and contextual factors that underpin the relationship between politics and security governance in Nigeria. Data were generated primarily from documentary sources, including government policy documents, security sector reports, legislative proceedings, academic publications, media investigations, and reports by civil society organizations such as Amnesty International and Transparency International.

The research utilized a case study design, focusing on key episodes of security politicization, including electoral security operations, regional appointment patterns of service chiefs, and state responses to insurgency and protest movements. The period of analysis spans from 1999 to 2023, covering successive democratic administrations. Data were analyzed thematically using content analysis, which enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns, interpret narratives, and evaluate institutional behaviors in relation to political influence. To enhance credibility and validity, triangulation was applied by comparing information from multiple sources. Interpretive analysis was grounded in Institutional Decay Theory, which provided a theoretical lens for explaining how repeated political interference erodes institutional professionalism and effectiveness. Ethical considerations were maintained by ensuring objectivity, accurate citation of sources, and the avoidance of partisan interpretations.

Method of Data Analysis

In this paper, a qualitative method of data analysis was employed where content of relevant documentary sources as well as government reports, media publications, and policy documents were analyzed to examine narratives surrounding security operations and governance. The qualitative approach enabled in-depth interpretation of meanings, motives, and institutional behaviors underlying the politicization process. This method provides contextual understanding of how political actors manipulate security institutions and how such practices affect democratic consolidation and national stability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional Decay Theory and the Politicization of Nigeria's Security System

Institutional Decay Theory explains how public institutions deteriorate over time when they fail to uphold legitimacy, performance, and rule-based governance. Key proponents such as Samuel P. Huntington (1965), Robert I. Rotberg (2010), and Francis Fukuyama (2014) argue that institutions decay when they become unable to adapt, lose autonomy, and are subordinated to the interests of dominant political elites rather than public welfare.

Major Assumptions of the Theory

1. Institutions are expected to maintain autonomy and professional norms; when external actors impose undue influence, institutions weaken (Huntington, 1965).
2. Decay occurs when informal patronage networks overpower formal rules, allowing personal loyalties to replace institutional authority (Fukuyama, 2014).
3. Corruption and misallocation of resources accelerate institutional decline, reducing operational efficiency and legitimacy (Rotberg, 2010).
4. Weakened institutions become trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle of dysfunction, struggling to recover capacity once credibility is lost.

Criticisms of Institutional Decay Theory

Despite its relevance, Institutional Decay Theory faces several criticisms:

Overemphasis on internal institutional weakness:

Critics argue the theory insufficiently considers *external* factors such as economic crises, foreign influence, global terrorism, or colonial legacies that may trigger decline (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Normative bias toward Western governance models:

The theory implies that institutions are “decayed” when they do not conform to Western-style bureaucratic standards, potentially ignoring cultural and contextual variations in governance structures.

Limited attention to institutional resilience:

Institutions can adapt and regain functionality through reforms, leadership change, or societal pressure. The theory tends to emphasize decline over recovery.

Elite agency underexplored:

While elites are acknowledged in driving decay, critics note a lack of explanation regarding *why* some political classes choose reform while others promote deterioration suggesting gaps in predictive power.

State-centric focus:

The framework reduces complex security dynamics to state institutions and neglects the rising influence of non-state actors (e.g., vigilantes, militias, private security), which play important roles in Nigeria’s contemporary security landscape.

Relevance of the Theory to the study

Applied to Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, the theory explains how the security system initially designed to uphold national defense and internal order has been steadily politicized. Decades of military rule produced centralized and hierarchical security structures closely tied to governing elites. After democratization in 1999, instead of restructuring these institutions to ensure professional autonomy, successive civilian governments inherited and exploited these authoritarian legacies.

Political interference in appointments, promotions, and operational decisions has gradually replaced meritocratic structures with loyalty-based patronage networks. As Huntington’s assumption predicts, such intrusion erodes professionalism and distorts institutional purpose. Security agencies are now frequently deployed to protect ruling party interests, influence elections, intimidate opposition, and suppress protests undermining impartiality and eroding public trust. Rotberg’s argument on corruption is evident as defense

budgets and internal security funds are often mismanaged, weakening equipment readiness and tactical capability. This fuels wider insecurity challenges such as insurgency, banditry, militancy, and kidnapping.

Institutional Decay Theory therefore illustrates that Nigeria's politicized security system is both a product and driver of institutional decline. Recovering lost capacity requires restoring autonomy, strengthening oversight, and rebuilding professional ethics to ensure security institutions serve national not partisan objectives.

Historical Context of Politicization in Nigeria

The politicization of Nigeria's security sector cannot be fully understood without situating it within the country's complex historical trajectory. From colonial administration to post-independence military rule and the transition to civilian governments, the entanglement of politics and security institutions has been a persistent feature of Nigeria's statecraft.

Colonial Legacy

The origins of security politicization in Nigeria are traceable to the colonial era. The British colonial administration designed security forces not as instruments of public protection but as tools of coercion to suppress resistance against colonial rule (Killingray, 1986). The colonial police and military were primarily deployed to enforce colonial ordinances, quell uprisings, and maintain the economic exploitation of indigenous populations (Osaghae, 1998). This foundation entrenched a culture where security services served ruling interests rather than communal welfare.

Here are several examples of colonial-legacies and how they contribute to the politicisation of the security system in Nigeria's Fourth Republic:

1. Colonial policing model geared to control rather than service Under British rule, policing in Nigeria was designed to suppress dissent, protect colonial economic interests, and maintain political order rather than to enforce rules impartially or serve citizens (Alemika, 1993). This legacy means that post-colonial security institutions inherited a mindset oriented toward regime protection rather than citizen security.
2. Centralised, top-down command structure and limited local accountability The colonial system established highly centralised security institutions (e.g., the Nigeria Police Force) with little community input or oversight (Onyeozili, 2005). That institutional structure persists in Nigeria, facilitating political control over the security apparatus and limiting decentralised, communitybased accountability.
3. Ethnic and regional imbalances rooted in indirect rule The British policy of indirect rule created, and institutionalised, divides between the North and South, and among ethnic groups with security structures used to favour some groups and suppress others (Ayika & Onwurah, 2025). Today, these dynamics feed politicisation: security appointments, deployments and enforcement can reflect regional/ethnic bias rather than professional criteria.
4. Ingrained culture of coercion, distrust and low legitimacy Colonial security forces often acted as instruments of coercion rather than partners of civil society (Alemika, 1993). Post-independence, the institutional culture of repression, low transparency and weak community engagement hindered public trust. Politicians exploit this lack of legitimacy to deploy security institutions for partisan ends rather than for impartial protection.
5. Legal and institutional frameworks inherited without transformation Many of the laws and institutional arrangements governing Nigerian security agencies were inherited from the colonial era (e.g., policing

- statutes, command structures) and were not substantially reformed to align with democratic oversight and accountability. Because of this, the politicisation of security systems is structurally enabled.
6. Underdevelopment and structural inequalities rooted in colonial economy The colonial administrative and economic model entrenched regional disparities and neglected large swathes of Nigeria (north/south, rural areas). These disparities provided fertile ground for insecurity and political manipulation of security agencies (Ayika & Onwurah, 2025). Politicians may then exploit insecurity for political gain, using the security forces to protect or privilege certain communities.
 7. On a final note, the violent suppression of anti-colonial movements such as the Aba Women's Riots of 1929 and the Enugu coal miners' strike of 1949 demonstrated the instrumentalization of security forces for political control (Afigbo, 1981). These events set precedents for the use of force to manage political dissent, a pattern that persisted into the post-independence era.

Post-Independence Political Competition and Military Coups

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the political elite inherited the colonial security architecture without significant reform. This continuity entrenched the use of security agencies as instruments of political domination (Suberu, 2001). In the First Republic (1960–1966), intense regional rivalries and zero-sum politics led to the politicization of security services. The Western Region crisis, also known as "Operation Wetie" (1965), is a salient example. Political disputes between factions of the Action Group party escalated into violent confrontations, with the police and security forces accused of partiality towards the federal government's preferred faction (Osaghae, 1998). The failure to manage these tensions culminated in Nigeria's first military coup in 1966. Subsequent military regimes institutionalized the politicization of security, as military leaders ruled both as heads of state and commanders-in-chief, subordinating national security to regime security (Luckham, 1971). Under General Sani Abacha's rule (1993–1998), for instance, state security services such as the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) and the State Security Service (SSS) were notorious for repressing political opposition and orchestrating human rights abuses (Ihonvbere, 1996).

Here are several concrete examples of post-independence political competition and military coups in Nigeria and how they relate to the politicization of the security system in the Fourth Republic.

1. Frequent military coups, transition to civilian rule and the embedded politicised security apparatus After independence in 1960, Nigeria experienced its first military coup in January 1966, followed by a countercoup in July 1966. These coups and the ensuing military regimes increasingly placed the security forces (army, military intelligence, police) under the direct control of the regime for political ends rather than purely national defence. For instance, the military took over governance, giving the army commanding political roles, and institutionalised a culture in which security services were politically deployed (rather than strictly professionally) (Adeakin 2012). These legacies carry into the Fourth Republic: many security institutions retain strong ties to political leadership, have weak civilian oversight, and are used in election-period operations or to manage internal dissent.
2. Military regimes' use of security forces for regime maintenance During periods of military rule (e.g., 1983-1999) the regimes of Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, and others institutionalised practices of using the security apparatus (army, intelligence, police) to enforce the regime's political control, including suppression of opposition, arrests without trial, and direct deployment in political tasks. The result: the boundaries between professional security mandate and political usage became blurred. This fosters a culture where security agencies are perceived as instruments of the regime rather than neutral defenders of state and society. In the Fourth Republic, such a pattern persists: security agencies may be mobilised during election campaigns, political rallies, protests or to secure certain elites.

3. Post-coup transitions and weak civilian oversight over security institutions Each coup and military regime period disrupted institutional development, oversight mechanisms, and professionalisation of security agencies. For example, the frequent change of governors, martial decrees, and the army's dominant role inhibited the establishment of robust civilian control. (See trends of political instability in Nigeria since independence.). Because of this institutional turbulence, when civilian rule resumed (since 1999) the security system remained heavily politicised: lines of accountability, chain of command autonomy, and a culture of loyalty to political officeholders persist.
4. Politicised security deployments in electoral and regional competition Post-independence political competition in Nigeria has often been zero-sum, ethnic and regional. Coups and military rule magnified these dynamics: officers and security commanders came from specific ethnic/regional backgrounds, fostering distrust and favouritism. For instance, the counter-coup of 1966 reflected ethnic grievances within the military. In the Fourth Republic, this translates into security appointments and deployments that reflect political loyalty and regional/ethnic affiliation rather than purely merit or national interest. This politicisation undermines impartiality of the security system, making it vulnerable to being used as a tool by political elites in competitive elections.

Civil War and Militarization of Politics

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) further entrenched the politicization of security. The federal military government framed the secessionist attempt by Biafra as an existential threat to the nation's unity, justifying massive militarization (Madiabo, 1980). The post-war policy of "No victor, no vanquished" masked deeper politicization, as the security establishment continued to view political opposition through the lens of existential threats, justifying surveillance and repression (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Second and Third Republics: Militarized Democracy

The brief return to civilian rule during the Second Republic (1979–1983) did little to de-politicize the security apparatus. President Shehu Shagari's administration was frequently accused of deploying security agencies to suppress opposition parties and rig elections, particularly during the 1983 general elections (Diamond, 1988). This abuse of security forces contributed to the military coup that ended the Second Republic. Similarly, during General Ibrahim Babangida's transitional program (1985–1993), the military maintained tight control over the political process. The annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election, widely regarded as Nigeria's freest and fairest, was enforced through security crackdowns on pro-democracy activists (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011).

Fourth Republic: Continuities and New Dimensions

The return to democracy in 1999, marking the beginning of the Fourth Republic, raised hopes for the professionalization of the security sector. However, old patterns persisted. Successive civilian administrations have continued to instrumentalize security agencies for political ends. Under President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and other security agencies were allegedly used to target political adversaries under the guise of anti-corruption campaigns (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2008).

In more recent times, the 2019 general elections saw accusations of military interference, with reports of armed forces being deployed to intimidate voters and opposition strongholds (International Crisis Group, 2019). The #EndSARS protests of 2020 against police brutality highlighted the extent of security politicization, as peaceful protesters were met with lethal force at the Lekki Toll Gate, widely believed to be a politically motivated crackdown (Amnesty International, 2020).

Furthermore, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East and widespread banditry in the North-West have often been securitized along political lines, with accusations of selective responses based on regional political

affiliations (Olojo, 2020). These dynamics illustrate the entrenchment of politicization even in the face of genuine security threats.

Manifestations of Security Politicization in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

The Fourth Republic, beginning in 1999, was expected to usher in a new era of democratic consolidation and professionalization of Nigeria's security institutions. However, instead of becoming neutral enforcers of state laws, security agencies in Nigeria have frequently been co-opted into the political arena, serving partisan interests and undermining democratic processes. This section explores the various manifestations of security politicization during the Fourth Republic, supported by empirical examples and scholarly analyses.

Electoral Security Manipulation

One of the most visible manifestations of security politicization in the Fourth Republic is the manipulation of security forces during electoral processes. Security agencies, including the police, military, and Department of State Services (DSS), have been consistently accused of partisan conduct during elections (Omotola, 2010). Instead of ensuring a level playing field, security forces have often been deployed to intimidate opposition candidates, suppress voter turnout in strongholds of rival parties, and provide security cover for electoral malpractices such as ballot box snatching and vote-buying (Bekoe & Burchard, 2017).

For instance, during the 2007 general elections widely regarded as one of the most flawed in Nigeria's history observers noted widespread misuse of security forces to rig elections in favour of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) (International Crisis Group, 2007). Similarly, the 2019 elections witnessed the deployment of military personnel to collation centres, a move criticized by civil society organizations and international observers as a form of electoral intimidation (Yagboyaju, 2019).

Here are some examples of electoral-security manipulation in Nigeria that illustrate the use or abuse of security agencies for partisan electoral advantage:

Examples

In a study of elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, it was observed that security agencies were "compromised by political elites to achieve their parochial interests ... used by politicians to create palpable fear and tension to scare potential voters away particularly in the strongholds of the opposition." Analysis of the 2019 general elections shows that various security agencies and personnel (including military and paramilitary) were deployed for election-duties. The paper states key challenges: "incompetence, lack of independence and professionalism, negative attitude of the political class ... deployment of the military for election" duties.

A 2025 article on policing and electoral violence states that during election periods the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) regularly "abuse Nigerians by beating, humiliating, and detaining those who hold opposing political opinions". It also states the police "serve as instruments of the ruling party ... rather than upholding neutrality". A vulnerability-study of Nigeria's electoral system since the Fourth Republic indicates misuse of the power of incumbents, ethnicity/religion, and weak enforcement of laws as factors enabling electoral manipulation; it specifically cites "intimidation, ballot box snatching, falsification of results" among abuses.

These examples show that security agencies are deployed not purely for protecting the electoral process, but for favouring the incumbent or ruling party (via intimidation, selective deployment, suppression).

The fact that the military or paramilitary agencies are used in election-security roles (rather than purely neutral policing) suggests institutional overlap between partisan politics and security functions. In addition, the pattern of intimidation and targeting opposition strongholds indicates the security system is instrumentalised as a tool of political competition rather than acting impartially. Moreover, the deficiencies in independence,

professionalism, and oversight of security agencies during elections reflect a decay in institutional autonomy, making manipulation easier.

Selective Enforcement of Law and Order

Another hallmark of politicization is the selective application of law enforcement powers, often targeting political opponents while shielding allies of the ruling party. Security agencies have been accused of failing to investigate or prosecute ruling party affiliates involved in electoral violence or corruption scandals, while zealously pursuing opposition figures (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria's foremost anti-corruption body, has been at the centre of such controversies. Scholars argue that while the EFCC has prosecuted several high-profile cases, it has disproportionately targeted members of opposition parties, particularly during election cycles (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2008; Smith, 2010). Under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, the anti-corruption campaign, though popular, has been criticized for its selective focus, with critics alleging that it functions as a political weapon against rivals (Amnesty International, 2018).

Militarization of Internal Security

The increasing reliance on military forces to address internal security challenges further reflects politicization. Instead of strengthening the police and other civilian law enforcement agencies, successive administrations have frequently deployed the military for roles traditionally reserved for civil authorities (Adebanwi, 2017). The deployment of soldiers for internal operations, such as "Operation Python Dance" in the South-East and "Operation Crocodile Smile" in the Niger Delta, has raised concerns about the militarization of civilian spaces and the targeting of politically sensitive regions (Onapajo, 2017). During the 2017 Operation Python Dance, military forces clamped down on members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a group advocating for secession, in what many analysts described as politically motivated repression (Nwaubani, 2017).

Here are several examples of militarization of internal security in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999 onwards) and how they relate to the politicization of the security system:

Examples

The deployment of the Nigerian Army for internal security operations (ISOs) well beyond their constitutional role of external defence. For instance, scholars note the Army's dramatic increase in internal deployment in the Fourth Republic due to the failure of the Nigeria Police Force to handle internal threats, thereby shifting responsibility from civilian policing to the military.

Consequence: This blur between military and policing duties weakens the professional separation between defence and internal security, making the security system more amenable to political manipulation (since the military is more directly under presidential/elite control).

In areas such as the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, the military has become the primary instrument of internal security. This militarized approach to internal threats reflects the constitutional and institutional legacy of using the armed forces as the default security provider.

Consequence: When the military is used for internal security (rather than community policing or law enforcement), it tends to employ force-centric tactics, which may favour regime security over citizen security, thereby injecting politics into security operations.

The creation of special army brigades or military formations dedicated to internal security zones. For example, the establishment of dedicated formations tasked with internal security in volatile regions (banditry, herderfarmer conflicts, kidnapping) rather than strictly external missions.

Consequence: The institutional structure of the security sector becomes oriented toward internal political tasks (such as securing regimes, stabilizing regions aligned with ruling coalitions) rather than purely neutral state security functions.

The militarization of policing and local peace-keeping: police and other civilian agencies become hybridised with military tactics, equipment, command structures and logics (joint task forces, military command involvement in internal operations) rather than being distinct civilian law-enforcement bodies.

Consequence: This diminishes civilian oversight, increases chances for human rights abuses, fosters a security paradigm that privileges regime control rather than accountability and citizen protection, and thus furthers politicization.

How this links to politicization of the security system

When the military is routinely used for internal security, the chain of command becomes closer to the executive (president/federal government) rather than mediated through civilian institutions (parliament, independent oversight). That gives political actors greater ability to use the security apparatus for partisan ends (e.g., managing dissent, elections, controlling opposition strongholds). Institutional autonomy of civilian policing is undermined when the military takes over internal operations: appointments, deployments and mandates get politicised, since military loyalty and national leadership loyalty can dominate over constitutional obligations.

The use of force-centric militarization often bypasses normal oversight mechanisms (judicial review, civilian review boards) and thus is open to partisan manipulation—e.g., selective application of security operations to favour regions or groups aligned with the ruling elite.

The perception and reality that security operations are controlled by political elites damages institutional legitimacy, erodes public trust, and makes citizens view security agencies as tools of the regime rather than protectors of the public.

Suppression of Peaceful Protests and Civic Movements

The Fourth Republic has also seen the securitization of civil dissent, whereby peaceful protests are framed as threats to national security and suppressed through forceful means. A notable example is the #EndSARS protest of 2020, which started as a peaceful youth-led movement against police brutality but was met with violent repression (Amnesty International, 2020).

The military's involvement in the Lekki Toll Gate incident, where live ammunition was used against unarmed protesters, epitomizes the politicization of security forces. Human rights organizations have argued that the government's heavy-handed response was aimed at quelling a movement perceived as a challenge to the political establishment (Obi, 2021). Similar patterns were observed during protests against fuel price hikes and government austerity measures, where security forces were deployed to disperse demonstrators violently (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Regional Bias and Politicization of Security Appointments

Another dimension of politicization in the Fourth Republic is the perceived regional and ethnic bias in the appointment of security chiefs. Analysts have observed that successive presidents tend to appoint heads of military and security agencies from their ethnic or regional constituencies, thereby raising concerns about the neutrality of these institutions (Adebayo, 2019). For example, during President Buhari's tenure, critics accused the administration of favouring officials from the northern region in key security appointments, undermining the federal character principle and fostering distrust among other regions (Campbell, 2020). This perception of ethnic favouritism has weakened public confidence in the impartiality of security services and further entrenched regional tensions.

The article “*Federal Character Principle and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Buhari’s Appointments of Heads of Security Agencies*” argues that under Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023) many security-agency heads were selected more on regional/ethnic/party loyalty than merit, undermining neutral professional appointments. This shows how the “federal character” principle (intended to ensure regional balance) becomes a mechanism for political bargaining rather than purely professional security institution design. Also, the effect: appointments reflect regional/ethnic calculations, reinforcing patronage networks and reducing autonomy of security institutions.

In the scholarly work “*Ethnic mobilisation and state fragility in Nigeria*” (2025) by O. Madueke, the author demonstrates how political elites use regional/ethnic identity to influence appointments in security agencies as part of broader elite competition. He notes that when security leadership is drawn disproportionately from certain ethnic/region groups (or rotated superficially), it signals to other elites that the institution is politicised. In addition, this dynamic contributes to public perceptions of bias, weakens legitimacy and fosters intra-elite mistrust, which opens space for politicised security operations.

The *PLAC Security Sector Mapping Report* (2019) points out structural oversight weaknesses in Nigeria’s security sector and highlights how appointments to high commands often neglect strict merit and professionalisation, favouring regional/elite interests. For example, top military and intelligence appointments sometimes follow political regime changes and align with ruling-party interests rather than strategic institutional continuity. Moreso, this linking of appointments to regime survival reinforces that security agencies serve partisan ends.

Partisan Framing of Security Threats

Politicians in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic have frequently framed security threats through a partisan lens to justify the use of force against rivals or discredit opposition-held territories. Insurgencies, separatist agitations, and communal conflicts are often interpreted and addressed in ways that align with political calculations rather than objective security assessments (Olojo, 2020). The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, for instance, has at times been politicized, with accusations that political actors exaggerate or downplay the crisis depending on their electoral interests (Campbell & Harwood, 2018). Similarly, clashes between farmers and herders, particularly in the Middle Belt, have been subject to politicized narratives that undermine impartial conflict resolution (International Crisis Group, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The politicization of Nigeria’s security system in the Fourth Republic represents one of the most persistent threats to democratic consolidation, rule of law, and national cohesion. Since the country’s return to democratic governance in 1999, successive administrations have been accused of manipulating the security architecture to serve partisan, ethnic, and personal interests rather than national objectives. This pervasive trend has transformed Nigeria’s security institutions from the police and military to intelligence and paramilitary agencies into instruments of political control, thereby undermining professionalism, accountability, and public trust. Historically, the roots of this politicization can be traced to colonial and postcolonial legacies. The colonial security apparatus was designed primarily to protect imperial interests rather than citizens, establishing a coercive and hierarchical system that lacked legitimacy. This authoritarian orientation was perpetuated under military regimes, which subordinated the security services to the whims of the ruling elite. Consequently, the transition to democracy in 1999 did not substantially alter institutional culture or operational frameworks. The same structures that once served colonial and military rulers were retained, enabling civilian politicians to inherit and exploit an already politicized system. Thus, what emerged was not a clean break from authoritarian control but a continuity of patronage-based and loyalty-driven security governance.

Throughout the Fourth Republic, the manipulation of the security system has been most visible during electoral cycles. Security agencies have frequently been deployed to influence elections, intimidate political opponents, and suppress dissent. Reports from the 2003, 2007, 2015, and 2019 elections revealed how the

police, military, and intelligence agencies were strategically positioned to favor ruling parties. Such interference has compromised the credibility of electoral processes and deepened public cynicism toward both the security establishment and democratic institutions. In a democracy, security agencies are expected to serve as neutral arbiters that ensure safety and order. However, in Nigeria, their involvement in partisan politics has blurred this neutrality, eroding institutional legitimacy and the people's faith in the state.

Furthermore, politicization has manifested in the lopsided appointment of service chiefs and senior security officials based on ethnic or regional affiliations. Successive presidents, particularly during the Buhari administration (2015–2023), were criticized for disproportionately appointing officers from specific regions to top security positions. This regional imbalance created perceptions of exclusion among other groups and fostered distrust in national institutions. As a result, the security architecture appeared more as a reflection of political and ethnic patronage than as a national defense system. Such practices weaken interagency cooperation, fuel internal divisions, and make collective national security responses ineffective.

The consequences of politicization are profound. The Nigerian security system has witnessed institutional decay, operational inefficiency, and declining professionalism. Political interference often determines command decisions, resource allocations, and even responses to crises. This undermines intelligence coordination, demoralizes officers, and emboldens insurgent and criminal groups who exploit institutional weaknesses. Moreover, the prioritization of regime security over citizen security has diverted attention from pressing internal threats such as terrorism, banditry, secessionist violence, and kidnapping. The resultant insecurity across regions from Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast to banditry in the Northwest and separatist agitations in the Southeast—exemplifies how politicized security institutions fail to respond effectively to complex, multidimensional threats. Institutional Decay Theory provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. The theory posits that when institutions are repeatedly manipulated for political gain, they lose coherence, effectiveness, and legitimacy. In Nigeria, the consistent use of the security apparatus for partisan purposes has eroded professional norms and institutional integrity. This decay has produced a security system that is reactive, compromised, and increasingly distrusted by citizens. Moreover, it perpetuates a vicious cycle: as institutions weaken, politicians find it easier to manipulate them, further deepening the decay.

Addressing these challenges requires deliberate depoliticization and structural reform. First, security appointments and promotions must be guided by merit, competence, and regional balance rather than political loyalty. Second, legislative and civilian oversight of security institutions should be strengthened through empowered committees, transparent budgeting, and public accountability mechanisms. Third, the security doctrine must shift from a state-centric to a human-security approach, focusing on citizens' welfare, community trust, and socioeconomic stability. Fourth, capacity building, ethical training, and improved welfare for security personnel should be prioritized to enhance morale and professionalism. Finally, civil society, the media, and academia must continue to advocate for transparency, accountability, and rule of law in security governance.

In conclusion, the politicization of Nigeria's security system in the Fourth Republic reflects the country's broader governance deficits: weak institutions, elite capture, and the personalization of power. Security agencies, which should protect the state and its citizens, have often been transformed into tools of political domination and repression. Reversing this trend demands sustained political will, institutional reform, and societal commitment to democratic norms. Without depoliticizing the security architecture, Nigeria's democracy will remain fragile, and its quest for sustainable peace and development will continue to be undermined. Therefore, reclaiming professionalism, neutrality, and accountability within the security system is not merely a governance reform; it is a prerequisite for the survival of Nigeria's democratic project and the realization of national security in its truest sense.

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