



PROTECTING THE CIVIC SPACE

Trends, Challenges, and Future Outlook in Nigeria





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Outlook in Nigeria



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About Kimpact

Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) is an independent non-governmental organisation that advances good governance, democratic rights, public policy, and public engagement. We do this by building informed and active citizens through capacity development, advancing public policies, data-driven advocacy, and reforms that create a more supportive environment for citizen-led development.

OUR MISSION: To inspire citizen-led democratic development that is anchored on the principles of participation, data-driven advocacy, strong democratic institutions, and public policies.

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Every day, at KIMPACT, we are committed to inspiring citizen-led democracy development. We do this because behind every thriving democracy with dividends lies active and informed citizens.

At KIMPACT, we believe in a democracy that truly works for everyone.

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This document has been produced by Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) to provide insights from its analysis of data gathered over 14 years on civic space issues in Nigeria. KDI hereby certifies that all views expressed in this document accurately reflect the analytical interpretation of verified, reliable, and evidence-based information collected from media reports, public records, and other credible sources.

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Executive Summary

Civic space, according to the United Nations, is the environment that enables people and groups to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies. States shape the legal and policy space within which people express views, assemble, associate, and engage in dialogue with one another and with authorities about issues that affect their lives, from the quality of basic services to better institutions and respect for fundamental freedoms¹. This civic arena has been under increasing restriction in Nigeria. Over the past decade, government crackdowns, security interventions, and legal restrictions have severely curtailed freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. This study presents an analysis of civic space in Nigeria, examining trends, regional disparities, and the interplay between security incidents and civic restrictions. The study combines quantitative data analysis, regional indexing and forecasting techniques to predict the future of civic space without significant reforms.

This study aims to:

1. **Assess the current state of civic space in Nigeria**, identifying key patterns and drivers of restriction.
2. **Analyze the relationship between security incidents and civic space violations**, determining the extent to which security responses contribute to shrinking civic freedoms.
3. **Forecast the future trajectory of civic space restrictions**, using time-series modelling to predict the future outlook.
4. **Provide evidence-based recommendations** for key stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners, to safeguard civic freedoms and democratic participation.



Key Findings

- 1. Rising Insecurity and Shrinking Civic Space:** Over 91,740 lives were lost in 13 years due to rising insecurity; at the same time, crackdowns, censorship, and legal restrictions escalated in states with unabated conflict and urban cities.
- 2. The Peak of Civic Space Restrictions (2020 – 2022):** The #EndSARS protests and its post-protest crackdowns in 2021, coupled with election-related tensions, triggered record-high civic space restrictions, peaking at 440 cases in 2021.
- 3. A Connection Between Security and Civic Restrictions:** As insecurity increases, civic freedoms tend to diminish—governments often react to perceived threats with measures that restrict rights and freedoms.
- 4. Government Security Measures Threaten Civil Liberties:** Press freedom, protests, and public assembly face growing restrictions as policies increasingly infringe on democratic rights.
- 5. The Most and Least Secure States:** Based on the 13-year harvested data, Jigawa, Ekiti, Osun, Abia, and Kwara rank as Nigeria’s safest states between 2011 and 2024, while the Southwest remains relatively stable, although there were pockets of violence within the period.
- 6. The Future of Civil Space in Nigeria:** Civic restrictions are set to rise yearly, hitting 1,846 cases by 2029 from 1196 in 2024 if no reforms are made.



Recommendations

To address the growing threats to civic freedoms, targeted interventions are needed across multiple stakeholders:

1. Nigerian Government and Security Agencies

- Amend laws with the potential to criminalise civic engagement and human rights, such as the Cybercrimes Act and Public Order Act.
- Adopt human rights-based security reforms to prevent excessive force against civic actors.
- Increase transparency and oversight of security agencies to curb abuses.
- Security agencies should abide by the code of conduct that regulates rules of engagement with civilians.

2. National and State Legislatures

- Enhance parliamentary oversight to hold security agencies accountable for civic space violations.

3. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Human Rights Groups

- Expand civic education programs to increase public awareness of rights and legal protections.
- Strengthen legal support mechanisms for activists facing arbitrary arrests.
- Develop real-time monitoring systems to track and respond to civic space violations.
- Commission periodic civic space assessments to track restrictions and inform policymaking.

4. International Development Partners and Diplomatic Missions

- Increase funding and capacity for local organisations working on civic

freedoms, democracy, and human rights.

5. Media Organizations and Journalists

- Expand investigative reporting on civic space violations to hold authorities accountable.
- Advocate for legal protections to prevent harassment and arrests of journalists.
- Combat misinformation and state propaganda used to justify civic space restrictions.

6. Judiciary and Legal Institutions

- Strengthen judicial independence to resist executive interference in civic space cases.
- Fast-track human rights cases in courts to ensure timely justice for activists and protesters.
- Develop specialized legal mechanisms to handle civic space-related cases more effectively.

■ 01.

Introduction



Civic space refers to the environment in which citizens exercise their fundamental rights, including freedom of assembly, association, and expression. In Nigeria, this civic space has undergone significant transformations, shaped by the interplay between government security measures and civil society dynamics.

Civic space encompasses the environment that houses the set of conditions that determine the extent to which all members of society, both as individuals and in informal or organised groups, are able to freely, effectively and without discrimination exercise their basic civil rights.

Historically, Nigeria's civic landscape has been marked by the exclusion of marginalised groups, a legacy rooted in colonial governance and military rule, which often prioritised state control over public accountability and civil liberties², a trend that continued into the post-independence era. Military regimes dominated the

political landscape for nearly half of the country's post-independence history, were characterised by rigid governance and hostility towards dissent, severely restricted civil liberties and stifled civil society³.

The transition to civilian rule in 1999 marked a significant turning point, as civil society groups played crucial roles in advocating for democracy and human rights. Their struggles, often met with violent repression, laid the groundwork for a more vibrant civic space⁴. However, even during this transition, the government maintained a careful stance towards civil liberties, particularly in the context of national security concerns, often framing restrictions as necessary for the protection of state interests.

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the shrinking civic space in Nigeria, where the ability of citizens to engage in democratic processes has been increasingly restricted by both state and non-state actors^{5,6}. While constitutional provisions exist to protect civil and political rights, authorities often interpret these laws broadly to justify crackdowns

on civil society organisations, activists, and independent media.

This repression takes various forms, including legal restrictions, targeted harassment, censorship of free speech, internet restrictions, proscription of religious/ethnic groups, the designation of dissenters as a threat to national security, and broader political intimidation, all aimed at curtailing dissent and limiting public demonstrations and access to information⁷⁸. Recent events, including crackdowns on social critics, bloggers, and activists challenging impunity and corruption, have further exacerbated the situation. The 2020 End Police Brutality #EndSARs and 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests vividly demonstrated the government's response to peaceful protests, with accounts of repression, freezing of bank accounts, and illegitimate detentions of protesters.

A key driver of this decline is the government's increasing use of national security as a justification for consolidating power and suppressing opposition⁹¹⁰. There is no gainsaying: Nigeria is plagued by various kinds of violent conflicts. Insecurity gets scarier by the day in Nigeria because it has remained unabated. Ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, political conflicts, terrorism, militancy, banditry, kidnapping, youth restiveness, electoral violence, and the like have deepened the security woes in Nigeria. The armed conflicts and insecurity are currently intertwined along intricate ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. There is no region in the country immune from the woes of insecurity¹¹. The early 2000s introduced new challenges to civic space, particularly with the rise of insurgent groups like Boko Haram. The government's response, framed as a necessity for national security, led to sweeping restrictions on civil freedoms, public engagement¹² and criminalisation of civil society activities¹³¹⁴. As a result, not only activists and journalists but also ordinary citizens face heightened scrutiny and restrictions on their rights to express dissent and organise collectively¹⁵.

This situation creates a paradox in which the state's efforts to maintain order often encroach on fundamental civic rights essential to a thriving democracy. In navigating these restrictions, civil society organisations frequently encountered government hostility and regulatory barriers. Expert studies have shown that few National level activists and organizations

were aware of legal frameworks like Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and countering financing of Terrorism (CFT) laws, let alone know how compliance or instrumentalization of AML/CFT fosters over-regulation, whether unintentional or spurious. Consequently, authorities at one point or another have leveraged to justify crackdowns on CSO activities¹⁶. This has fostered an environment where civil liberties are persistently threatened, complicating the relationship between state security measures and civic engagement. ***This raises the critical question: How can insecurity-ravaged states like Nigeria strike a balance between combating violent security threats and safeguarding civic freedoms?***

In response to these pressing challenges, civil society actors, including activists and informal groups, have developed diverse strategies to reclaim civic space. These responses often involve leveraging technology and social media for mobilisation, conducting research to document violations, and forming cross-border alliances with international organisations¹⁷. One such initiative is the **illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES)**. The INSPIRES intervention, spearheaded by the Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) in collaboration with Dataphyte and as part of the Action Group on Free Civic Space (AGFCS), aims to systematically track and document issues related to civic space while also fostering a platform for sustained dialogue on the imperative to safeguard civic freedoms, particularly considering efforts to combat insecurity. Dataphyte, as a key partner in the project, leveraged a Media Scraping AI tool to scrape events-based indicators relevant to civic spaces across various media platforms in Nigeria.

Utilising this extensive dataset, KDI conducted further analysis to assess the effectiveness of machine learning in predicting shifts in civic space, aiming to surpass traditional approaches. The insights garnered from this analysis are the basis for this report. This report provides a data-driven analysis of these trends over the past 13 years, examining how security policies, legal frameworks, and state actions have influenced civic space in Nigeria. Through statistical modelling and predictive analysis, it highlights patterns of repression, resistance, and the ongoing struggle for civil liberties in an increasingly restrictive environment.





■ 02.

About the
Study

Rationale for the Study and Research Questions



The interplay between governmental security measures and civil society dynamics has led to an unintended consequence: a shrinking civic space where citizens, journalists, and activists face heightened risks for engaging in democratic processes. This trend has raised concerns about the long-term implications for governance, accountability, and public participation in political discourse.

Given the complexity of Nigeria's socio-political landscape, it is crucial to investigate how security policies interact with civil liberties and what mechanisms exist for ensuring a balance between state security imperatives and democratic freedoms.

The Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) Project seeks to bridge the gap between security policies and civic freedoms by systematically tracking and analysing civic space dynamics in Nigeria. Leveraging media scraping AI tools and machine learning, this study provides data-driven insights into patterns of civic space restrictions, enabling a more informed and proactive response.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant trends and patterns in the restriction of civic space in Nigeria over the past decade?
2. What are the likely shifts in the future dynamics of the civic space based on historical data?
3. How do government security measures impact civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and digital rights?

By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on governance, civic freedoms, and security policies in Nigeria.

Research Goal and Objectives:

The overarching goal of this research is to analyse and predict patterns of civic space restrictions in Nigeria, particularly in relation to security policies and government actions. The study aims to provide empirical evidence on how civic space is evolving and to foster strategies for safeguarding civic freedoms in an insecurity-prone state like Nigeria.

To achieve this goal, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To track the shrinking of civic space, particularly in relation to governments' security measures policies, and identify patterns and trends in the same.
2. To leverage effective statistical and predictive models to forecast if there would be future shifts in civic space dynamics based on historical data.
3. To produce a report that would form the basis for informed dialogue among key stakeholders (civil society, policymakers, international

partners, and the public) on strategies for balancing security imperatives with civic freedoms.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study hold significant implications for various stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organisations, the media, and the broader public. The significance of this study can be outlined as follows:

- 1. Policy Relevance:** The study provides data-driven insights that can assist policymakers in designing security policies that do not infringe on fundamental freedoms. By analysing historical trends, this research can highlight areas where security measures have overstepped legal and democratic boundaries, offering recommendations for policy reforms that uphold both national security and civic rights.
- 2. Civil Society Empowerment:** The findings will equip civil society organisations (CSOs), activists, and media organisations with empirical evidence to advocate for stronger civic protections. By documenting instances of repression and legal restrictions, this study will support advocacy efforts aimed at fostering a more open and democratic society.
- 3. Predictive Insights:** By leveraging machine learning models, this research offers a forward-looking perspective on civic space dynamics, allowing for early interventions against repressive measures. Predictive analysis can help CSOs, journalists, and human rights defenders anticipate and prepare for potential threats to civic freedoms, enhancing resilience in the face of government-imposed restrictions.

■ 03.

**Methodology: Research
Scope, Design, and
Data**

Research Scope

This study focuses on the interplay between security policies and civil liberties over the last 13 years (2011–2024). The research examines how government-imposed measures have systematically narrowed the space for civic engagement.

The civic space issues are limited to the following under listed:

1. Restrictions on Freedom of Assembly and Association
2. Restrictions on Freedom of Expression
3. Attacks on Journalists
4. Intimidation of Activists and Members of Civil Society
5. Unlawful Arrest / Police Brutality
6. Restrictive Legislation
7. Restriction of Access to Information


The geographical scope of the study covers **Nigeria’s 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja**. Given

the country’s diverse political,

ethnic, and socio-economic landscape, the research seeks to identify regional variations in the restriction of civic space, paying close attention to differences between urban and rural settings, as well as conflict-prone and relatively stable regions.

Thematically, the study explores:

- **Patterns and trends** in civic space restrictions, using media scraping and AI-driven analysis of news reports, legal cases, and government pronouncements.



For this study, Civic Space in Nigeria is defined as the environment that enables individuals and organisations to engage in political, economic, and social processes. Also refers to the environment in which citizens exercise their fundamental rights.

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- **The impact of security measures**, such as counterterrorism policies, protest regulations, and digital surveillance, on civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and digital rights.
 - **The predictive capacity of machine learning models**, to assess the likelihood of future civic space restrictions based on historical data and current trends.
-

Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, integrating **quantitative** data analysis (through media scraping AI and machine learning predictions) with **qualitative** insights (from case studies and secondary data sources). This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of civic space dynamics in Nigeria, combining empirical data with contextual narratives to illustrate the lived experiences of civic actors.

Data

The study relies on multiple sources of data to provide a holistic analysis of civic space restrictions:

1. **Media Scraping Tool:** This tool extracts reports on civic space events (e.g., protests, legal restrictions, crackdowns on activists, and media) from news articles, blogs, and government statements published since 2011. By compiling this data, the study can identify trends and patterns in civic space restrictions.
2. **Granular Quantitative Data on Security Incidents:** The study integrates data from the **Nigeria Security Tracker (NST)** to examine the correlation between insecurity and civic space restrictions. This dataset provides insights into the geographical distribution and intensity of security-related events.

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- 3. Qualitative Data from Secondary Sources:** To supplement the quantitative analysis, the study builds case studies from scholarly journals, policy reports, and first-hand accounts of civic space restrictions. This qualitative approach helps contextualise the numerical trends observed in the data.
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Limitations and Assumptions

Despite its methodological rigour, this study faces several limitations and assumptions:

- 1. Data Gaps:** Media reports may not comprehensively cover all civic space restrictions, particularly those occurring in remote areas or involving marginalised groups. Additionally, government-imposed censorship of the insecurity report may limit the availability of critical information.
- 2. Government Censorship:** Official data on security measures and legal restrictions may be incomplete or biased due to the political affiliation of some media outfits. This limitation requires researchers to cross-validate findings with independent sources.
- 3. Machine Learning Constraints:** While predictive models can identify trends in civic space restrictions, they may not fully capture the complex political and social dynamics at play. Human interpretation remains necessary for contextualising machine-generated insights.

Despite these challenges, the study employs multiple data validation techniques, a mixed-methods approach, and a strong analytical framework to ensure robust, reliable, and actionable insights into the intersection of security policies and civic freedoms.



■ 04.

Highlights of the study



The INSPIRES Project analysed 14,779 security incidents in Nigeria from 2011 to 2024, uncovering critical trends in civic space restrictions, insecurity, and government responses. The study leveraged media-scraping AI tools and machine learning to track, predict, and interpret patterns shaping Nigeria’s civic freedoms. Below are the key insights of the study:

- 1. Rising Insecurity and Shrinking Civic Space:** Over 91,740 lives were lost in 13 years due to rising insecurity; at the same time, crackdowns, censorship, and legal restrictions escalated in states with unabated conflict and prominent urban cities.
 - 2. The Peak of Civic Space Restrictions (2020 – 2022):** The #EndSARS protests and its post-protest crackdowns in 2021, coupled with election-related tensions, triggered record-high civic space restrictions, peaking at 440 cases in 2021.
 - 3. A Strong Link Between Security and Civic Restrictions:** As insecurity rises, civic freedoms shrink—governments respond to threats with repression, forming a direct and statistically significant pattern.
 - 4. Government Security Measures Threaten Civil Liberties:** Press freedom, protests, and public assembly face growing restrictions as security policies increasingly infringe on democratic rights.
 - 5. The Most and Least Secure States:** Jigawa, Ekiti, Osun, Abia, and Kwara rank as Nigeria’s safest states, while the Southwest remain relatively stable; there are still pockets of violence.
- 1. The Future of Civil Space in Nigeria:** Civic restrictions are set to rise yearly, hitting 1,846 cases by 2029 from 1196 in 2024 if no reforms are made.

Key Finding 1

In the last 13 years, 91,740 deaths were recorded due to insecurity, with 2014 peaking at 14,470 deaths. Of the 14,780 security incidents, 1,196 (8.1%) directly impacted civic space, including protest crackdowns, media censorship, and legal restrictions.

Insecurity in Nigeria since the advent of the Fourth Republic in 1999 has been marked by a dramatic escalation of violence, crime, and social unrest driven by historical, political, and economic factors. The roots of this insecurity lie in the interplay of ethnic tensions, governance failures, and economic disparities. The legacy of past military regimes and constitutional frameworks continues to shape the country's security landscape.¹⁸

The 1999 Constitution, adopted in response to Nigeria's violent past, most notably the 1967–70 Civil War, which claimed over a million lives¹⁹—was intended to foster national unity through power-sharing mechanisms. However, it has struggled to address deep-seated mistrust among the country's diverse ethnic groups.²⁰ The over-centralisation of power and resources, coupled with the federal character principle, has often favoured certain groups, exacerbating feelings of marginalisation and injustice, among others.²¹

Economic disparities, particularly in resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta, have further fuelled unrest. The federal government's control over mineral resources has led to widespread corruption and the exploitation of local communities, igniting conflicts over resource allocation and local governance²². Additionally, the historical grievances related to agricultural practices, such as the tensions between farmers and herders, are deeply rooted in socio-economic structures that have evolved, revealing both immediate and long-term causes of conflict.²³ Since the Fourth Republic, Nigeria has witnessed an alarming rise in various forms of insecurity,

including kidnapping, insurgencies, ethno-religious conflicts, farmer-herder clashes, banditry, and politically motivated violence, all of which have manifested across the country. Between **2011 and 2024**, Nigeria recorded **14,779 incidents of insecurity**, with a staggering **91,740 deaths**. The **peak year for fatalities was 2014**, when **14,470 people lost their lives**, largely due to Boko Haram's insurgency and increased communal clashes.

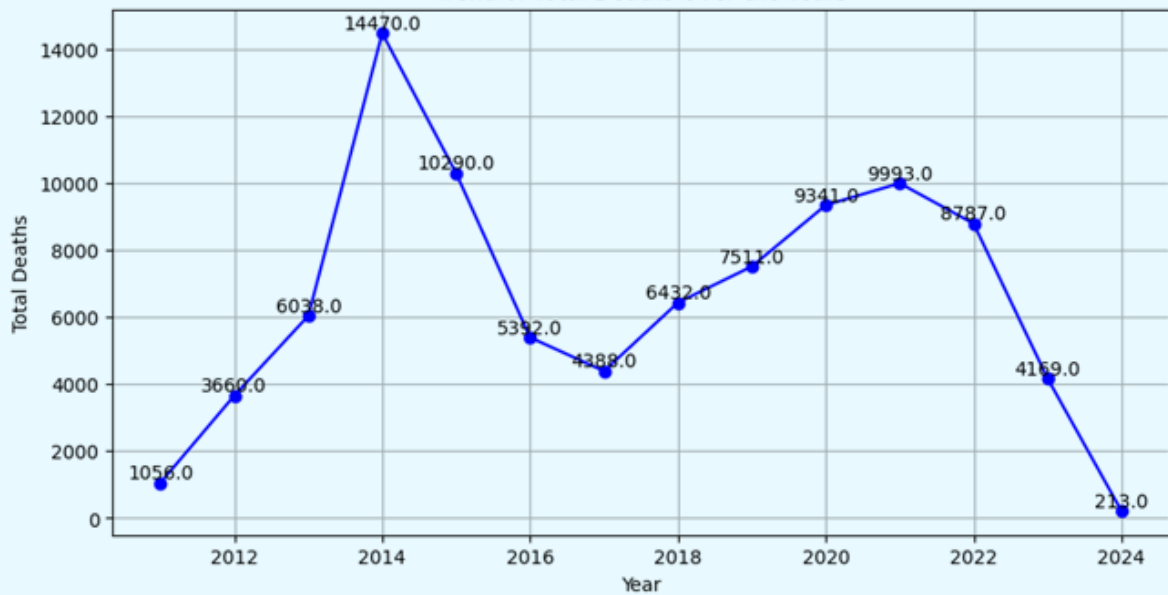
14,779

Incidents of insecurity in Nigeria between 2011 and 2024 with 91,740 fatalities

Trend of Incidents Per Year



Trend of Total Deaths Over the Years



Below is a chronological list of some significant security issues and election-related crises in Nigeria from **1999 to 2024**.

1999–2006: Early Democratic Struggles and Ethno-Religious Conflicts

- **Transition to civilian rule (1999):** Nigeria's return to democracy did not immediately bring stability, as widespread communal conflicts erupted, particularly in Kaduna, Jos (Plateau), and Benue, fuelled by ethnic and religious tensions.
- **Odi Massacre (19 December 1999):** The Nigerian Armed Forces launched a military operation in Odi, Bayelsa State, in response to the killing of twelve policemen by local militia. The crackdown resulted in the destruction of the community.
- **Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) declaration (22–24 May 2000):** MASSOB leader Ralph Uwazuruike declared the Republic of Biafra in Aba, Abia State, hoisting its flag. Two days later, 54 people were arrested for alleged treason.

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- **Sharia law crisis (2000–2001):** The introduction of Sharia law in northern states triggered violent clashes between Muslims and Christians, leading to hundreds of deaths.
 - **Jos Religious Crisis (7–17 September 2001):** Sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims in Jos, Plateau State, resulted in over 1,000 deaths.
 - **Zaki Biam Massacre (20–24 October 2001):** The Nigerian Army launched 'Operation No Living Thing' to retaliate against the killing of nineteen soldiers, leading to the execution of hundreds of unarmed Tiv civilians.
 - **Bola Ige Assassination (23 December 2001):** The former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Federation, Bola Ige, was assassinated in his Ibadan home under mysterious circumstances.
 - **Ikeja Military Cantonment Explosion (27 January 2002):** A massive explosion at a military arms depot in Lagos caused widespread destruction, killing over 1,000 people.
 - **Igwe Barnabas Assassination (10 September 2002):** The chairman of the Nigeria Bar Association (Onitsha Branch), along with his wife, was assassinated in Anambra State.
 - **Miss World Pageant Riots (20 November 2002):** A comment in ThisDay newspaper regarding the Miss World pageant and Prophet Muhammad led to violent protests in northern Nigeria, resulting in dozens of deaths.
 - **Marshal Sokari Harry Assassination (5 March 2003):** The former Chairman of the PDP Rivers State branch was assassinated in Abuja ahead of the 2003 elections.
 - **Yelwa Massacre (4 February 2004):** 78 Christians were killed inside a church by an armed Muslim militia.
 - **Aminasori Alfred Dikibo Assassination (6 February 2004):** The PDP South–South National Vice–Chairman was gunned down.
 - **Yelwa Massacre Retaliation (2 May 2004):** 630 Muslims were killed in revenge attacks by Christian militias.

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- **State of Emergency in Plateau (May 2004):** President Obasanjo declared a state of emergency, suspending Governor Joshua Dariye over escalating religious violence.
 - **Funso Williams Assassination (27 July 2006):** The PDP governorship aspirant for Lagos State was murdered in his home, a suspected case of political assassination.

2007–2014: The Rise of Boko Haram and Peak Insecurity

Boko Haram’s insurgency began in 2009, escalating into a full-scale crisis by 2011, with attacks concentrated in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa.

- **11–12 June 2009** – Following the killing of fourteen of his followers in a joint military and police operation in Borno State, Mohammed Yusuf, leader of Boko Haram, an Islamic insurgent group, threatens the federal government with reprisals.
- **26–31 July 2009** – Boko Haram launches an uprising in Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Gombe, Kano, and Katsina. The Nigerian military’s response reportedly leaves about 800 people dead.
- **19 December 2009** – The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), an insurgent group, announces its first attack on an oil pipeline since the Federal Government’s amnesty offer.
- **25 January 2010** – Dipo Dina, an Action Congress (AC) gubernatorial hopeful in Ogun State and former candidate in the 2007 election, is assassinated in Ota, Ogun State.
- **1 October 2010** – Suspected militants bomb the National Stadium, Abuja, during the National Day rally.
- The 2011 post-election violence led to over 800 deaths, marking one of Nigeria’s deadliest election-related conflicts.
- **16 June 2011** – Boko Haram bombs the headquarters of the Nigeria

Police in Abuja.

- **26 August 2011** – Boko Haram bombs the United Nations building in Abuja.
- **31 December 2011** – President Goodluck Jonathan declares a state of emergency in parts of Nigeria plagued by a violent Islamic insurgency and orders the closure of borders with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.
- **2 January 2012** – Fuel subsidy removal protests break out under the hashtag **#OccupyNigeria**.
- **7 January 2012** – At least thirty-seven people are killed in attacks by Boko Haram, which orders Christians to leave northern Nigeria.
- **9–10 January 2012** – Nigerians protest against a sharp increase in petrol prices, pressuring President Goodluck Jonathan to reverse his removal of fuel subsidies.
- **21 January 2012** – More than 100 people are killed in a single day of coordinated bombings and shootings in Kano.
- **8 February 2013** – Nine women involved in polio vaccination are shot to death in Kano by suspected Boko Haram members.
- **16 April 2013** – The Baga massacre begins in Baga, Borno State; as many as 200 civilians are killed, hundreds wounded, and over 2,000 houses and businesses are destroyed.
- **7 May 2013** – Over seventy-three personnel from security agencies, including the Police and the Department of State Services (DSS), are killed by members of the Ombatse cult in an ambush at Alakyo village, Nasarawa State.
- **14 May 2013** – The Federal Government declares a state of emergency in Yobe, Borno, and Adamawa states, sending in troops to combat Boko Haram.
- **14 February 2014** – Boko Haram terrorists massacre 121 Christian villagers in Konduga, Borno State.

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- **16 February 2014** – Suspected Islamic militants kill 90 people in Izghe village near the border with Cameroon.
 - **25 February 2014** – Boko Haram kills fifty-nine boys at the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi, Yobe State.
 - **14 March 2014** – Islamic militants attack Nigerian Army barracks in Maiduguri, Borno State.
 - **14–15 April 2014** – Two bombs explode at a bus station in Abuja, killing at least eighty-eight people and injuring more than 200.
 - **14 April 2014** – Boko Haram kidnaps 276 mostly Christian female students from Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State.
 - **18 May 2014** – Back-to-back bomb blasts kill at least 118 people and wound forty-five in central Jos.
 - **1 December 2014** – Dual Boko Haram attacks in Maiduguri and Damaturu leave at least seventy-seven dead, including thirty-three police officers, six soldiers, and twenty militants.
 - **6 December 2014** – Unidentified gunmen break into New Minna Prison, Niger State, and free an estimated 200 inmates.

2014 was the deadliest year, with 14,470 deaths, fueled by Boko Haram's territorial expansion, including the Chibok schoolgirls' abduction and the Baga massacre.

2015–2019: Rising Banditry, Farmer-Herder Clashes, and Political Suppression

A surge in armed banditry in Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina intensified security concerns.

- **7–8 October 2016** – The Department of State Security (DSS) raids the residences of several judges in Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Gombe, citing corruption allegations.

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- **19 February 2018** – Boko Haram kidnaps 110 schoolgirls, aged 11–19, from Government Girls Science and Technical College, Dapchi, Yobe State.
 - **7 August 2018** – DSS operatives invaded the National Assembly, denying lawmakers access to the premises. The Acting President sacked DSS Director-General Lawal Daura for the “unauthorised takeover of the National Assembly complex and violation of constitutional order.”
 - **2018 saw one of the deadliest farmer–herder conflicts, with over 1,300 deaths, particularly in Benue, Plateau, and Taraba.**
 - **1 August 2019** – DSS temporarily releases Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, leader of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, to travel to India for medical treatment. He had been detained for four years in defiance of court orders.
 - **2019 General Elections** – Widespread voter suppression, police brutality, and threats of internet shutdown restrict civic space.

2020–2024: #EndSARS, Election-Related Violence, and Government Crackdowns

Thirty people were killed and thirty-five injured in a bomb explosion by Boko Haram in Gamboru, Borno State. (**6 January 2020**)

- About seventy soldiers were ambushed and killed by Boko Haram in Goneri village, Borno State. (**24 March 2020**)
- Bandits kill forty-seven people in attacks on villages in Katsina State. (**18 April 2020**)
- Musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, 22 years old, was sentenced to death by hanging in Kano State for blasphemy against Prophet Mohammed. (**11 August 2020**)
- A video shows Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) police officers shooting a young Nigerian in front of Wetland Hotel, Ughelli, Delta State. The footage trends online, with claims that the officers took the young

man's vehicle. Public outcry follows, especially on Twitter, with the **#ENDSARS** hashtag trending. (**3 October 2020**)

- Another report is shared on social media of SARS officers killing a 20-year-old upcoming musician, Daniel Chibuike (Sleek), in his neighbourhood. (**5 October 2020**)
- Nationwide protests tagged **#EndSARS** start against police brutality, harassment, and extortion. (**8 October 2020**)
- **Lekki Massacre:** Nigerian soldiers open fire on unarmed protestors at the Lekki Toll Gate, killing several people. (**20 October 2020**)
- Over 300 students at the Government Secondary School, Kankara, Katsina State, were kidnapped. President Buhari was holidaying in his country home in the state when the kidnapping happened. (**11 December 2020**)
- Katsina State Governor Aminu Bello Masari announced that 344 victims of the Government Secondary School, Kankara kidnapping, were released from captivity in neighbouring Zamfara State. (**17 December 2020**)
- **The #EndSARS protests of 2020 marked a defining moment in Nigeria's civic space history. The movement, driven by youth against police brutality, led to a violent government crackdown, culminating in the Lekki Toll Gate shooting and increased state surveillance.**
- Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) armed fighters overrun a military base in Marte, Borno State. (**6 January 2021**)
- Bandits attack Government Science College, Kagara, in Rafi Local Government Area of Niger State, abducting forty-two students and killing one pupil. (**17 February 2021**)
- Bandits abduct 279 schoolgirls at Government Girls' Secondary School, Jangebe, Talata-Mafara Local Government Area, Zamfara State. (**26 February 2021**)
- Bandits kidnap thirty-nine students at the Federal College of Forestry

Mechanization, Afaka, Igabi Local Government Area, Kaduna State. (**11 March 2021**)

- Bandits abduct twenty Greenfield University students and kill two; five more are later killed while the rest are freed after reportedly paying a ransom. (**20 April 2021**)
- Abubakar Shekau (Abu Mohammed Abubakar al-Sheikawi), leader of Boko Haram, was killed during a clash with the Islamic State West Africa Province. (**19 May 2021**)
- Bandits abduct over 200 students of an Islamiyya school located at Tegina in the Rafi Local Government Area of Niger State. (**30 May 2021**)
- Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, announced that Twitter's operations in Nigeria would be '**suspended indefinitely**' because the company engages in activities that are capable of **undermining Nigeria's corporate existence**. (**4 June 2021**)
- The Nigerian government suspends Twitter, blocking it from all internet service providers in the country. (**5 June 2021**)
- Bandits kill a police officer and kidnap at least eighty students and five teachers from the Federal Government College, Birnin Yauri, in Kebbi State. (**17 June 2021**)
- Several more students were kidnapped in Birnin Yauri, Kebbi State. (**24 June 2021**)
- The Department of State Services (DSS) announces that it raided the Ibadan home of Yoruba nation agitator Sunday Adeyemo (popularly called **Sunday Igboho**), leading to the death of two of Igboho's aides and the arrest of thirteen others. (**1 July 2021**).
- Gunmen abduct 140 Bethel Baptist High School students in Kaduna State. This officially brought the number of abducted students in 2021 to over 1,000 (**5 July 2021**).
- After fleeing Nigeria, Yoruba nation agitator Sunday Adeyemo is arrested at the Cadjehoun Airport in Cotonou, Benin Republic, while on

his way to Germany (**19 July 2021**).

- An armed gang carried out a mass kidnapping of 140 pupils from Bethel Baptist Secondary School, Kujuma, Chikun, Kaduna State; twenty-six pupils and a teacher were rescued (**5 July 2021**).
- Armed men suspected to be terrorists attacked the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA), Zaria, Kaduna State, killing two officers and abducting one other. (**24 August 2021**)
- **Emancipation Centre for Crisis Victims in Nigeria (EC-CVN)** announces that no fewer than 102 communities in Plateau State have been sacked and forcefully occupied by herdsmen. (5 December 2021)

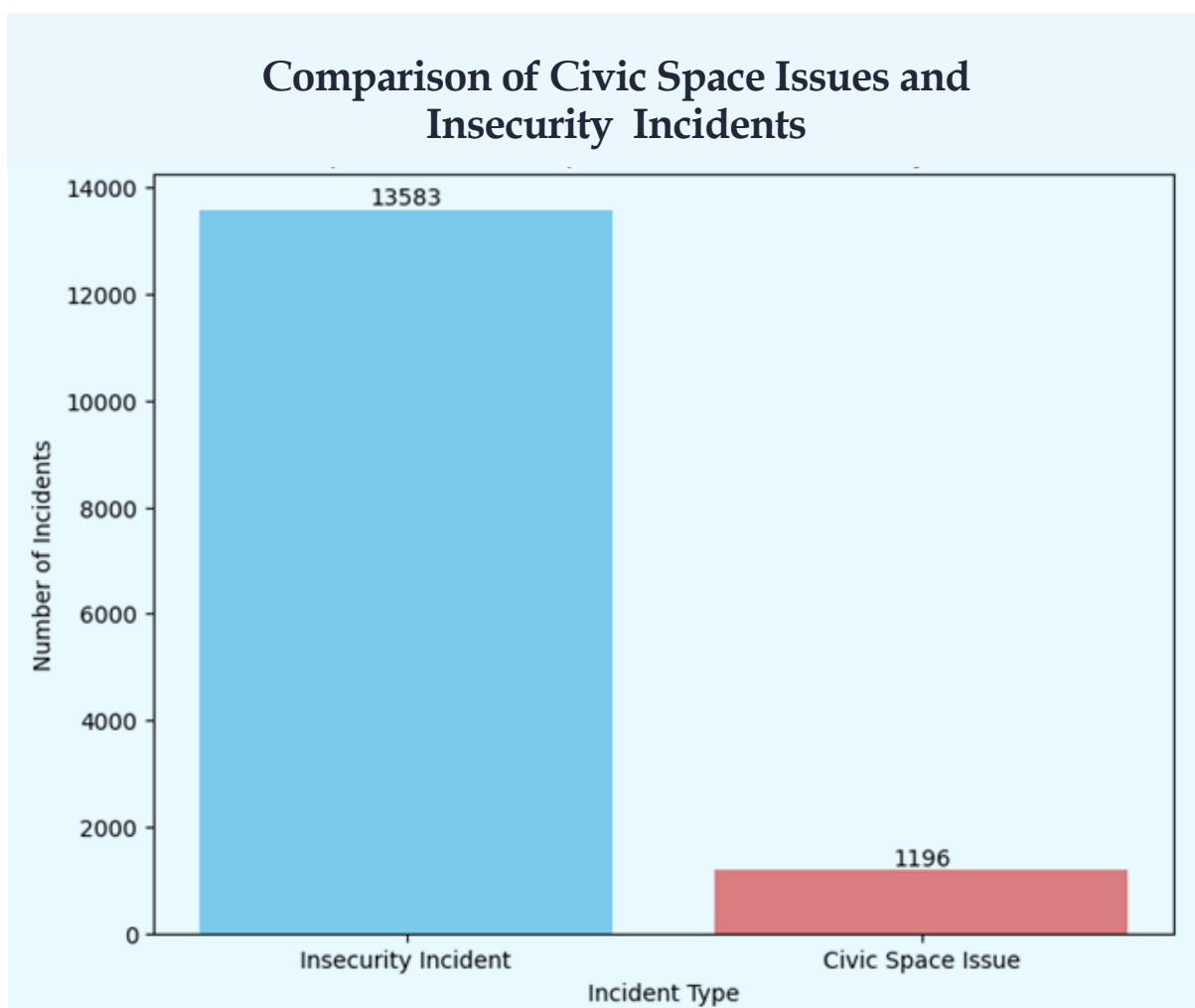
2021 recorded the highest number of civic space restrictions (440 cases) due to post-protest crackdowns.

- Over 200 people were killed by bandits in Zamfara State, representing the largest terrorist attack in recent times in Nigeria. (**4–6 January 2022**)
- A bandit gang killed over fifty people in Dankade, Kebbi State. (**14–15 January 2022**)
- Bandit gangs carry out mass shootings in Sabaka and Kanya in Kebbi State, killing over eighty people. (**8 March 2022**)
- Over **160 passengers** travelling by train from Abuja to Kaduna are kidnapped and held by terrorists suspected to be Boko Haram members. (**28 March 2022**)
- A gang of bandits believed to be Fulani herdsmen attacked **nine villages** in Kanam and Wase Local Government Areas, **killing more than 150 people** in a series of attacks in Plateau State and kidnapping about seventy people. (**10 April 2022**)
- Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a **Christian second-year student** of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, was accused of blasphemy and was killed by a **mob of Muslim students**. (**2 May 2022**)

- A mass shooting and bomb blast occurred at **St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State**, killing at least forty people. Islamic State West Africa Province is suspected to have carried out the attack. **(5 June 2022)**
- Boko Haram attacks a medium-security prison located in Kuje, Abuja, and frees some of its members detained there. **(5 July 2022)**

The 2023 elections saw the militarisation of the electoral process, with police and security forces restricting opposition rallies and cracking down on post-election protests.

List culled from "Adebanwi W, ed. Chronology of the Fourth Republic. In: Democracy and Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Governance, Political Economy, and Party Politics 1999–2023. Western Africa Series. Boydell & Brewer; 2023: xviii–xxxiii."

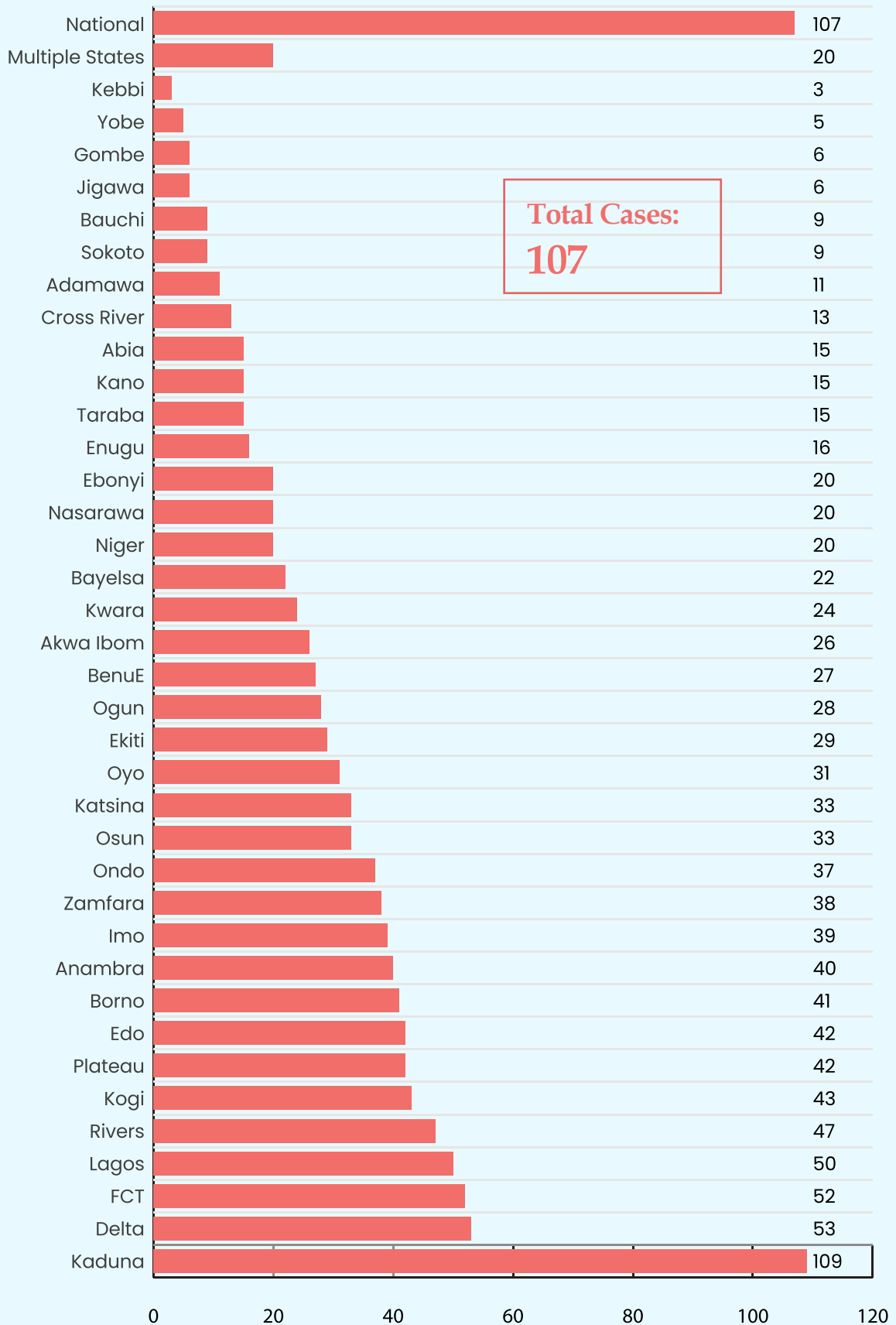


The persistent insecurity across Nigeria has not only resulted in the tragic loss of lives but has also deepened the restrictions on civic space, manifesting in widespread crackdowns on protests, media censorship, and legal constraints on political expression. Analysing the evolving nature of these restrictions reveals a troubling pattern: In states with unabated conflict and prominent urban centres, the constriction of civic freedoms has intensified alongside the rise in violence.

Between 2020 and 2024, at least **1,196** security incidents—accounting for **8.1%** of all documented cases—directly impacted civic space. The data highlights a clear geographic pattern, with civic space issues being particularly pronounced in states that are either conflict-ridden or serve as hubs of political and economic activity.



Civil Space Issue Count Per State



Kaduna, with the highest recorded cases (109), emerges as the epicentre of civic space suppression. The state, long plagued by ethno-religious violence and banditry, has also witnessed a consistent crackdown on public gatherings, protests, and dissenting voices. Authorities have frequently resorted to heavy-handed measures, including arrests, intimidation of activists, and the stifling of press freedom, exacerbating the already volatile environment.

Similarly, Plateau (42), Borno (41), Anambra (40), Imo (39), and Zamfara (38) reflect a trend where conflict has provided a backdrop for escalating restrictions. These states have not only suffered from insurgency, communal clashes, and separatist agitation but have also seen a growing tendency to silence dissent. Protesters advocating for justice, victims' rights, or even basic governance reforms have been met with state-backed suppression, often under the guise of maintaining public order. Journalists attempting to document these crises have faced intimidation, arbitrary detentions, and, in some cases, outright censorship.

In addition to conflict zones, states that have major urban centres also rank highly in civic space restrictions. Delta (53), the Federal Capital Territory (52), Lagos (50), Rivers (47), and Edo (42) stand out as key locations where civic engagement has been curtailed. These areas, known for their active civil society, political activism, and media presence, have experienced an increasing number of protests met with forceful dispersal, legal repression, and digital surveillance. Lagos is Nigeria's economic hub and the epicentre of civic activism in Nigeria. It was the primary stage for the #EndSARS protests, a movement that sparked nationwide resistance against police brutality. The Lekki Toll Gate shooting on October 20, 2020, remains a defining moment in Nigeria's civic history, marking an intense moment of government surveillance of protest organisers and sustained restrictions on freedom of assembly.

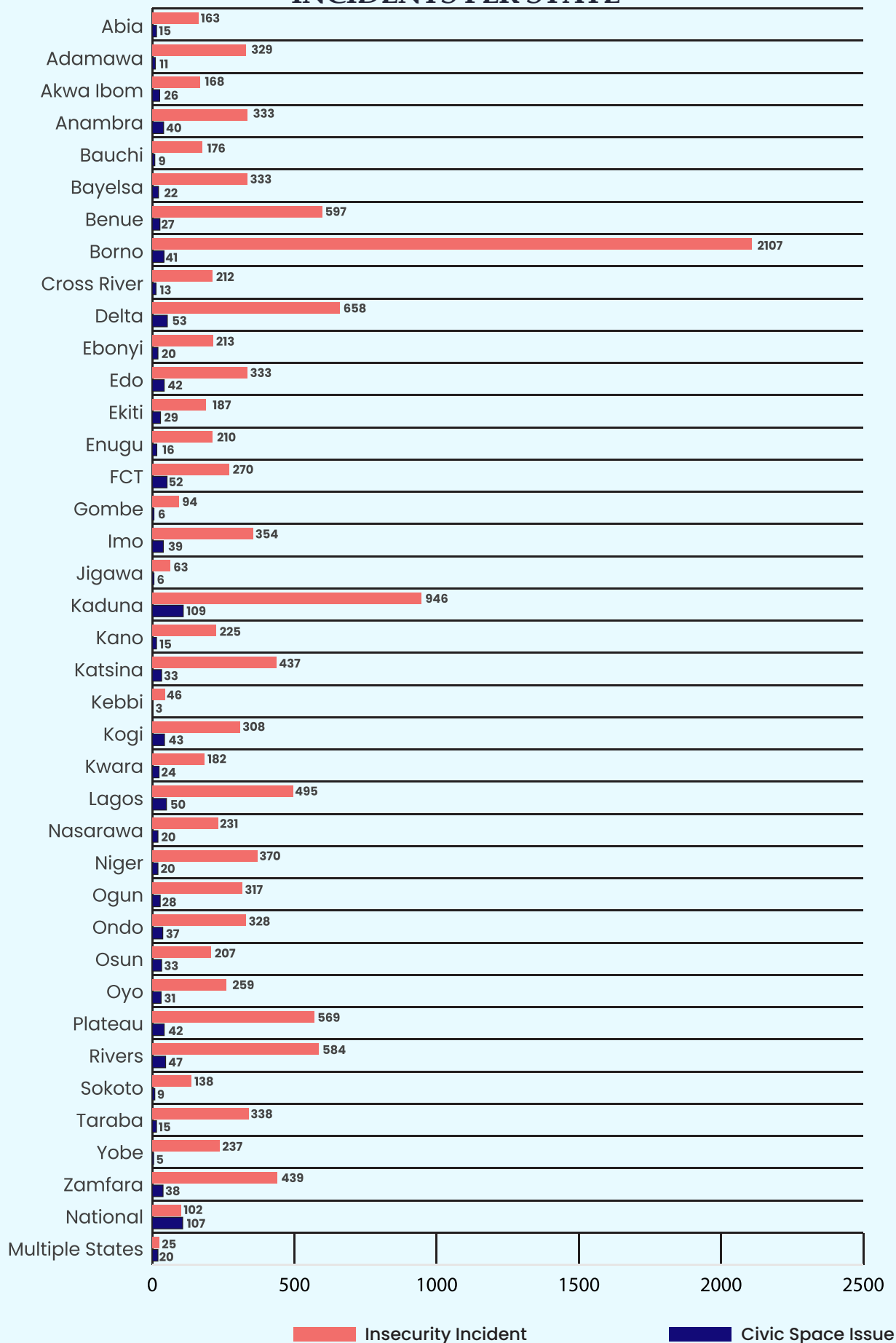
The Federal Capital Territory, despite being the seat of government and a supposed symbol of democratic governance, has paradoxically seen one of the highest counts of civic space restrictions. Activist groups often find it increasingly difficult to organise civil demonstrations, and the press faces

growing scrutiny when reporting on civic actions. In Rivers and Delta states, both home to a long history of political activism and environmental justice movements, similar patterns emerge.

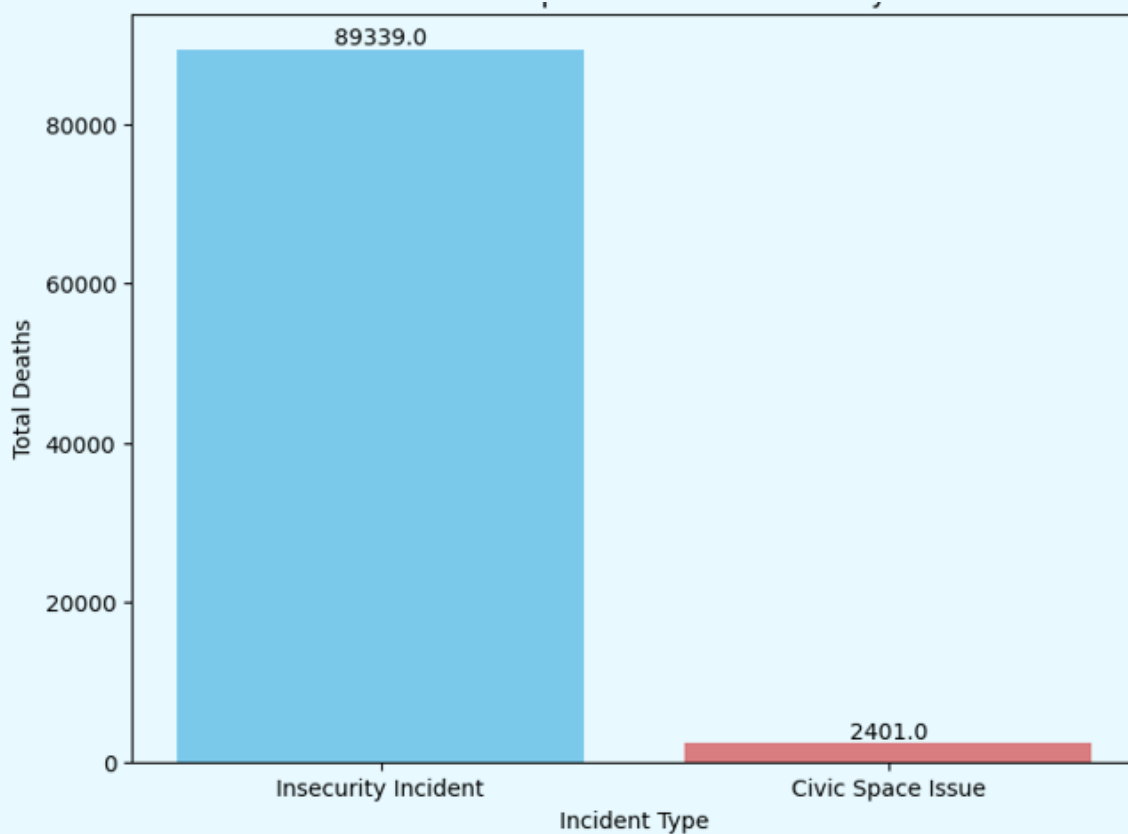
Beyond these aforementioned states, other states have not been spared. Even relatively stable states such as Ekiti (29), Ogun (28), and Kwara (24), constraints on expression and increasing use of laws against cybercrime and defamation to silence activists remain prevalent. This suggests that the closing of civic space is not merely a response to immediate security concerns but a broader trend aimed at curbing collective action and limiting public scrutiny of governance. The constraints are not incidental but systematic—this illustrates a troubling shift towards a more controlled public sphere where open dialogue, activism, and media freedom are increasingly becoming difficult.



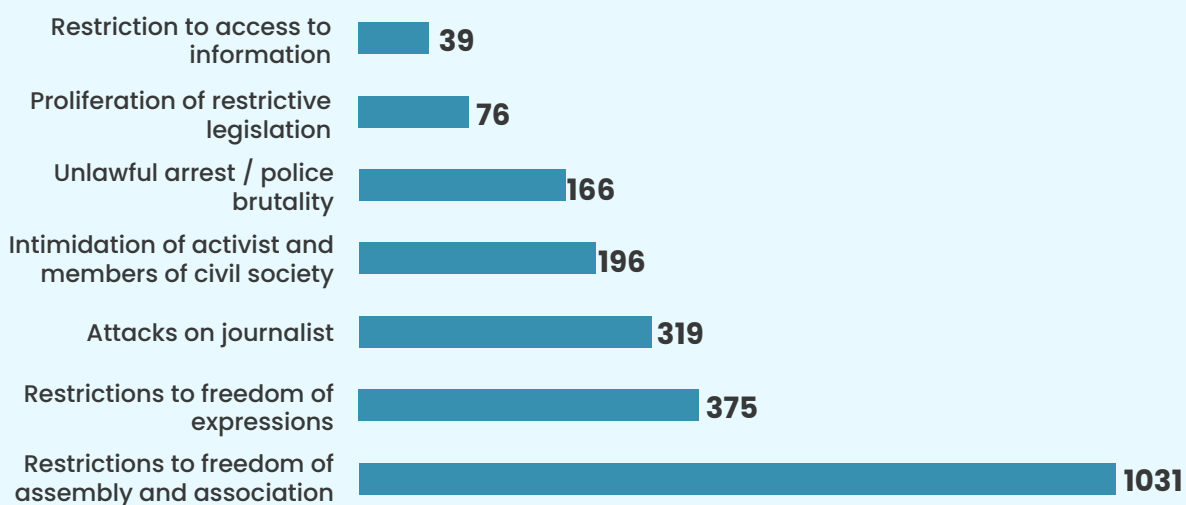
COMPARISON OF CIVIC SPACE ISSUES AND INSECURITY INCIDENTS PER STATE



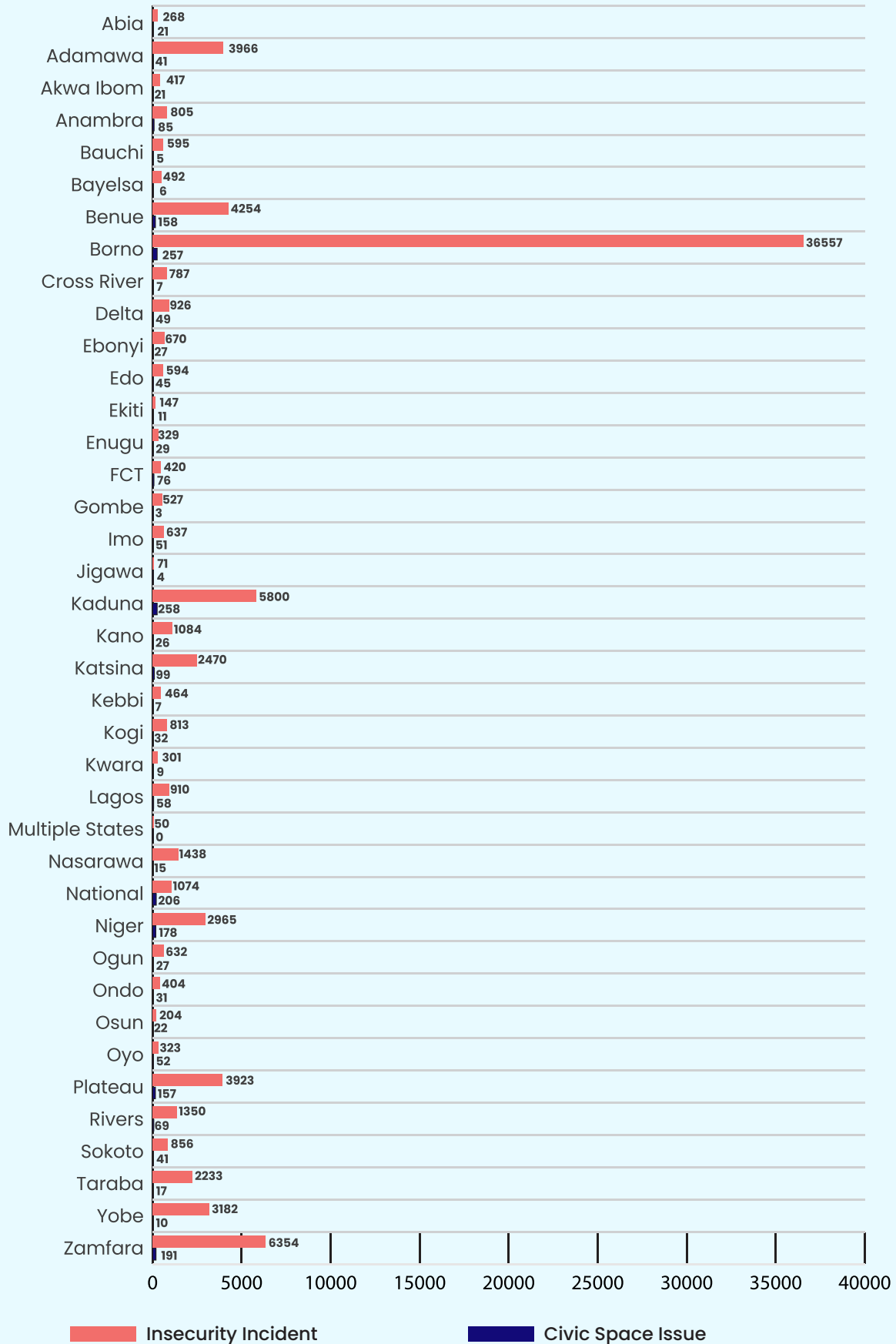
TOTAL DEATHS IN CIVIL SPACE ISSUES VS INSECURITY INCIDENTS



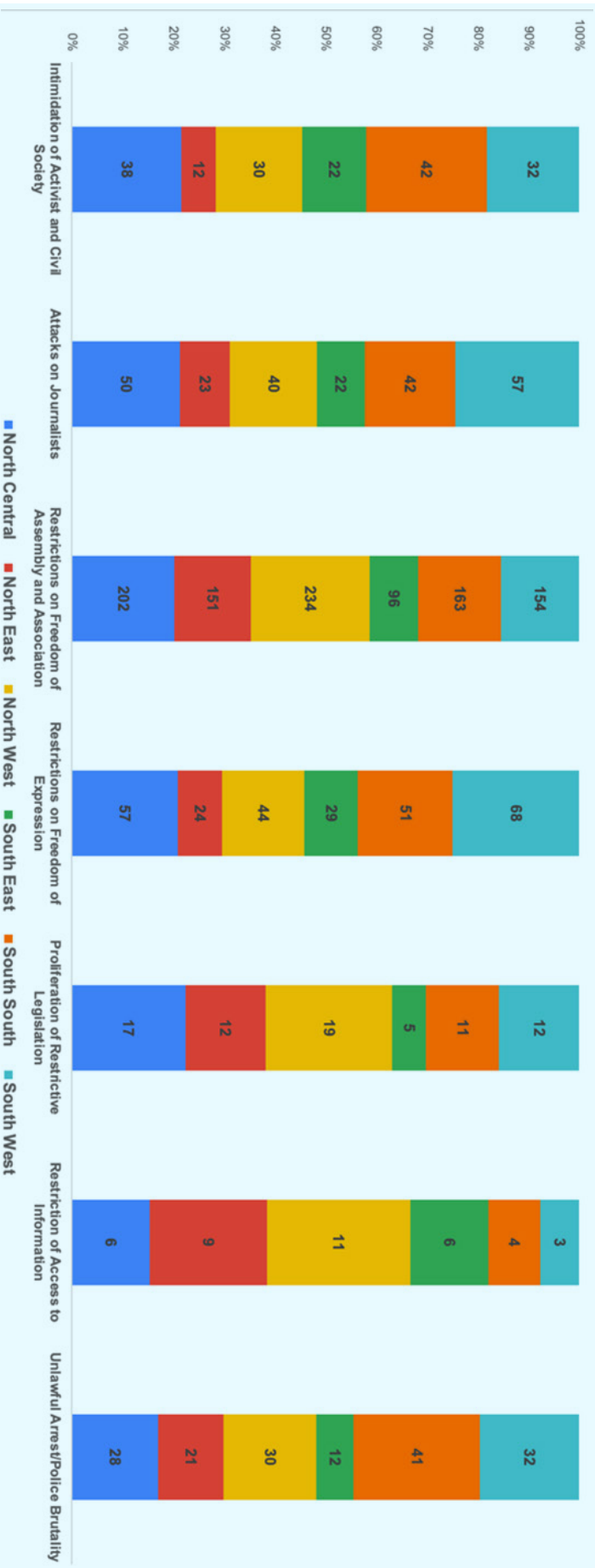
FREQUENCY OF THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CIVIC SPACE ISSUES



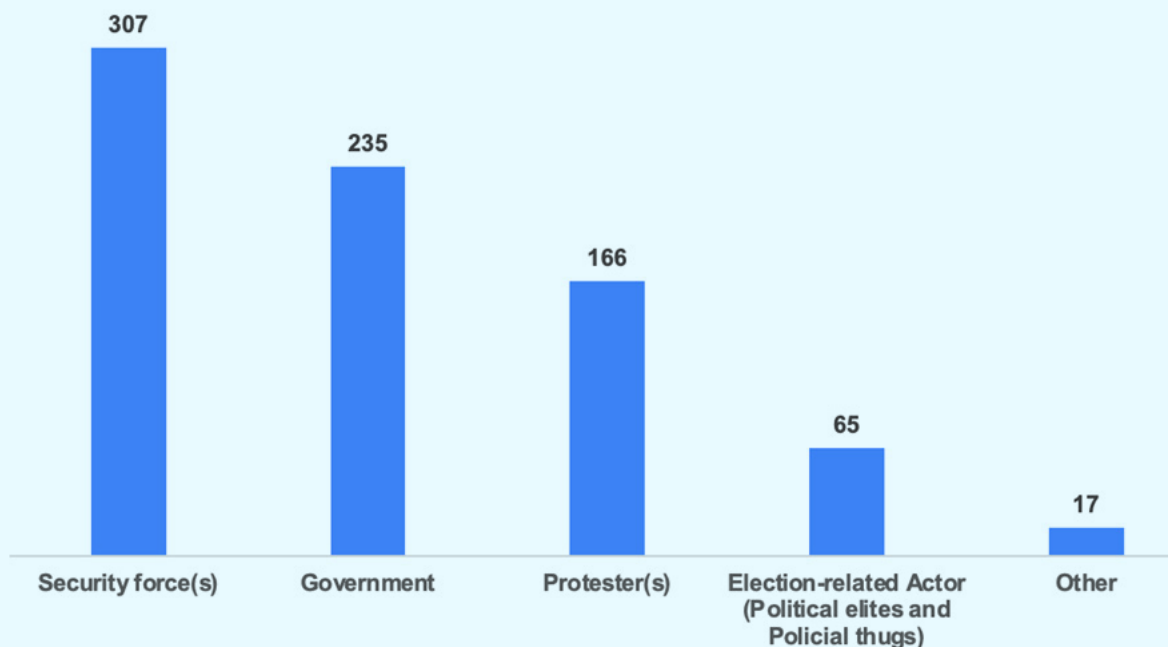
TOTAL DEATHS IN CIVIL SPACE ISSUES VS INSECURITY INCIDENTS PER STATE



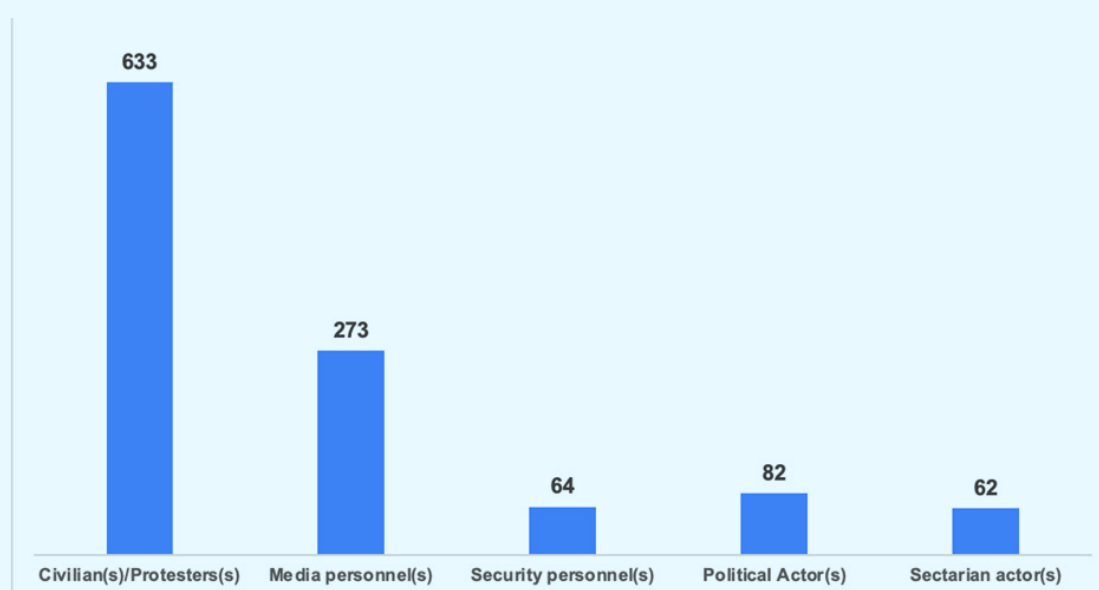
DISAGGREGATION OF THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CIVIC SPACE ISSUES PER GEO-POLITICAL ZONES



DISAGGREGATION OF THE PERPETRATORS OF CIVIL SPACE ISSUES



DISAGGREGATION OF THE VICTIMS OF CIVIL SPACE ISSUES



Key Finding 2

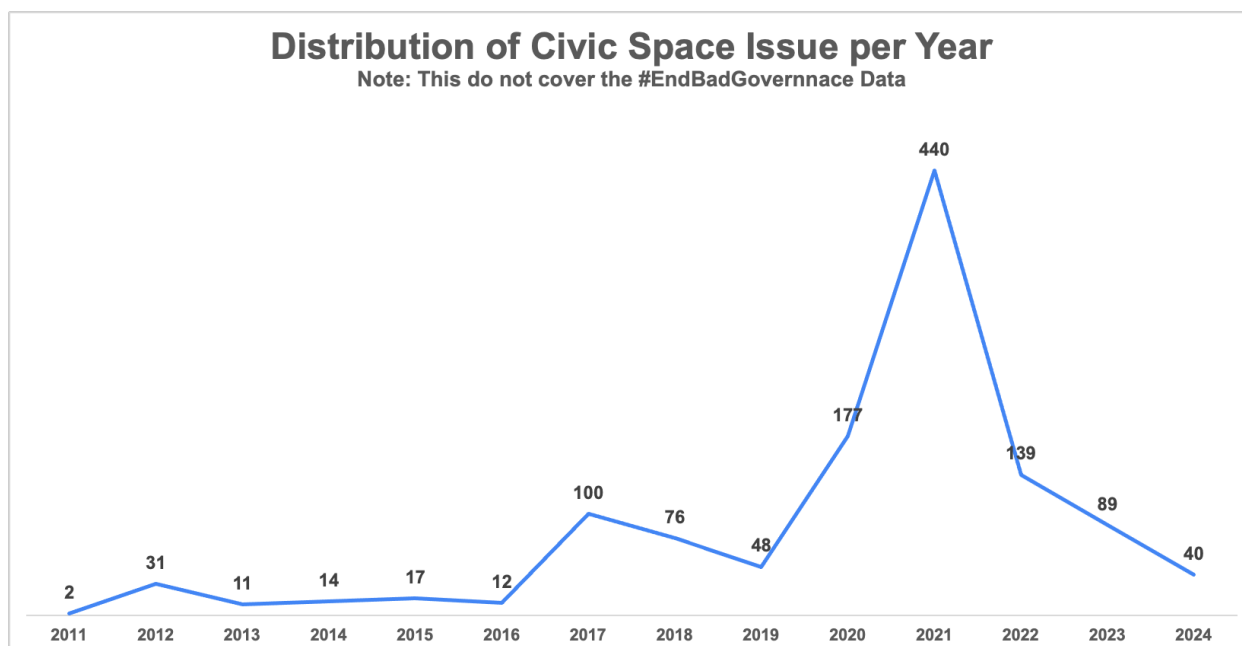
The Peak of Civic Space Restrictions (2020–2022): The #EndSARS protests and its post-protest crackdowns in 2021, coupled with election-related tensions, triggered record-high civic space restrictions, peaking at 440 cases in 2021.

Between 2020 and 2022, Nigeria experienced an unprecedented surge in civic space restrictions, with 2021 marking the peak at 440 documented cases, followed by 2020 with 177 cases and 2022 with 139 cases. This sharp rise was not coincidental; it was directly linked to major political and security events that shaped the country’s civic landscape. The #EndSARS protests of 2020, the government’s post-protest crackdowns in 2021, and the restrictions that crawled into 2022 ahead of the 2023 elections created an environment where civil liberties were systematically constrained.

DISTRIBUTION OF CIVIC SPACE ISSUES PER YEAR

Note: This does not cover the #EndBadGovernance Data





The year 2020 was a watershed moment for civic activism in Nigeria, as the #EndSARS protests became the largest youth-led movement in the country’s history. What began as an online outcry against police brutality quickly transformed into nationwide demonstrations demanding comprehensive reforms in governance, human rights, and security. However, the government’s disposition was swift and severe. Security forces used excessive force to disperse protesters, culminating in the infamous Lekki Toll Gate shooting on October 20, 2020. In the aftermath, authorities escalated efforts to silence activists by freezing bank accounts linked to protest organisers, arresting vocal supporters, and tightening restrictions on digital activism. The immediate crackdown on civic freedoms in 2020 set the stage for more aggressive suppression in 2021.

By 2021, the Nigerian government intensified its efforts to stifle dissent, leading to the highest recorded number of civic space restrictions in over a decade. The state capitalised on the momentum from the previous year’s protests to introduce and enforce policies aimed at curbing online and offline activism. The ban on Twitter in June 2021 became one of the most significant manifestations of this crackdown. The government justified the ban by citing concerns over misinformation and threats to national security, but it was widely perceived as retaliation for Twitter’s role in amplifying the #EndSARS movement and its decision to remove a controversial tweet by the president. The ban not only curtailed freedom of expression but also

disrupted the digital economy and activism, limiting the ability of civil society actors to organise and mobilize.

Additionally, journalists and media organisations faced increased harassment, censorship, and intimidation in 2021. Physical attacks on journalists escalated, with many facing arrests, threats, or forced disappearances. This period saw a decline in press freedom as self-censorship became a survival strategy for many journalists seeking to avoid government retaliation. The broader lesson from 2021 was that beyond immediate protest crackdowns, authorities were willing to sustain long-term restrictions to deter future civic uprisings.

By 2022, Nigeria's political landscape was dominated by preparations for the 2023 general elections, and civic space restrictions took on a new dimension. The enforcement of laws, such as the Cybercrime Act and the Anti-Terrorism Act, was increasingly weaponised against activists and journalists. Arbitrary arrests of political critics became more frequent, and the use of state security forces to ensure that proposed protests did not hold intensified. No gainsaying, the restrictions imposed between 2020 and 2022 reflect a broader trend of democratic backsliding, where civic engagement is increasingly viewed as a threat rather than an essential component of governance. This period serves as a reminder that the fight for civic space is continuous, requiring continuous advocacy from civil society actors, journalists, and the international community.



Key Finding³

A Strong Link Between Security and Civic Restrictions: As insecurity rises, civic freedoms shrink – governments respond to threats with repression, forming a direct and statistically significant pattern.

To examine the relationship between security incidents and civic space restrictions in Nigeria, we conducted a correlation analysis using statistical techniques. The goal was to determine whether a rise in insecurity is associated with an increase in government-imposed civic restrictions. We used **Pearson’s correlation coefficient (r)**, which shows how closely two variables move together:

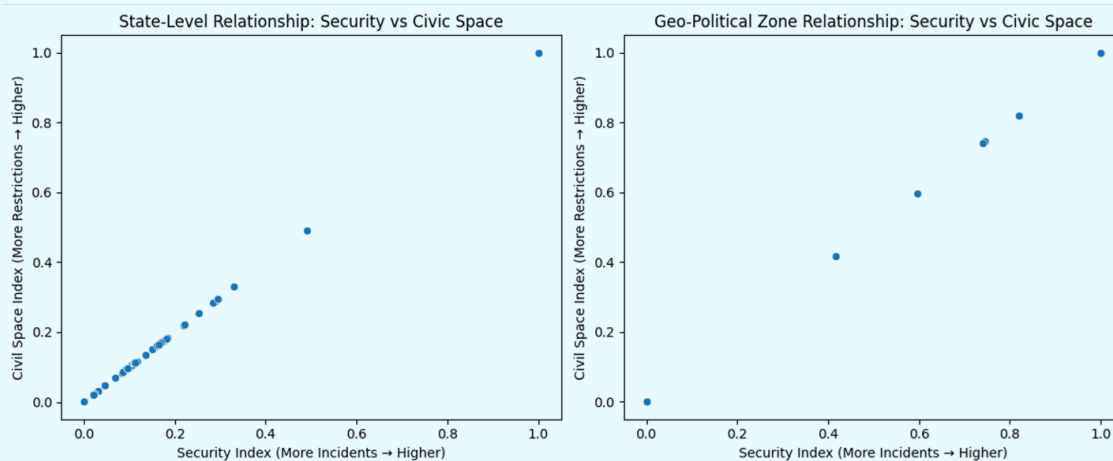
- A value close to **1** indicates a strong **positive** correlation (i.e., as one variable increases, so does the other).
- A value close to **-1** means a **negative** correlation (i.e., as one increases, the other decreases).

A value around **0** suggests no meaningful relationship.



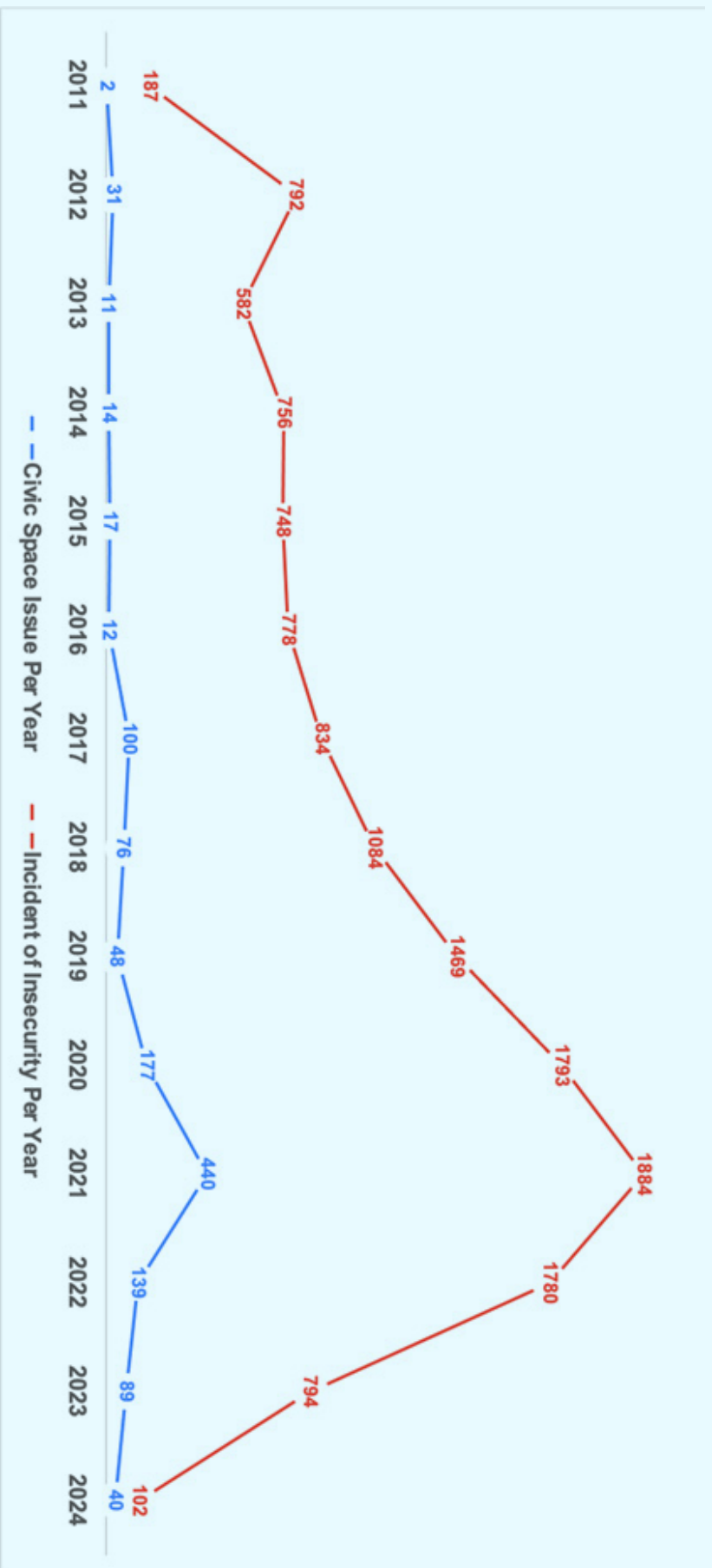
OUTCOME OF THE CORRELATION AND REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Level	Correlation Coefficient	p-value
State-Level	1.000	0.000
Geo-Political Zone	1.000	0.000



The data analysis confirms a striking and statistically significant correlation between security incidents and civic space restrictions in Nigeria. At both the state and geo-political zone levels, the correlation coefficient of 1.000 (p-value: 0.000) indicates a perfect linear relationship between the two variables. This means that as insecurity rises, civic restrictions increase in direct proportion.

TRENDS OF SECURITY INCIDENTS AND CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS PER YEAR



To further confirm the relationship, we ran an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to see how well security incidents predict civic space restrictions. The results showed an R-squared value of 1.000, meaning that security incidents completely explain the variation in civic restrictions. This is a rare statistical finding- however, it just highlights how government responses to insecurity systematically impact civic liberties and the civic environment.

OLS Regression Results

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=====
Dep. Variable:   Civil_Space_Issues   R-squared:           1.000
Model:          OLS                   Adj. R-squared:      1.000
Method:         Least Squares         F-statistic:         5.806e+31
Date:           Sat, 15 Feb 2025      Prob (F-statistic):  0.00
Time:           09:25:28              Log-Likelihood:      1099.1
No. Observations: 40                 AIC:                 -2194.
Df Residuals:   38                   BIC:                 -2191.
Df Model:       1
Covariance Type: nonrobust
=====

```

	coef	std err	t	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
const	-9.948e-14	6.67e-14	-1.492	0.144	-2.34e-13	3.55e-14
Security_Incidents	1.0000	1.31e-16	7.62e+15	0.000	1.000	1.000

```

=====
Omnibus:                57.730   Durbin-Watson:         1.484
Prob(Omnibus):          0.000   Jarque-Bera (JB):      400.516
Skew:                   -3.420   Prob(JB):              1.07e-87
Kurtosis:               16.911   Cond. No.              740.
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Notes:

[1] Standard Errors assume that the covariance matrix of the errors is correctly specified.

This pattern is not just theoretical and random, it is clear, predictable and deeply rooted in lived experiences. This report x-rayed the different categories of government response to insecurity, their frequency, and their impact on civil liberties. Additionally, it provides at least real-life examples for each response category.

Government Response	Frequency (Number of Times Used)	Impact on Civic Liberties & Civic Space	Examples
Military Deployment & Security Crackdowns	18	High. Often leads to human rights violations, suppression of protests, and restrictions on movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Zaria Massacre (2015): Nigerian Army crackdown on the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), killing over 300 people. - Lekki Toll Gate Shooting (2020): Military fired on peaceful #EndSARS protesters, killing multiple demonstrators. - Odi Massacre (1999): Military invasion in response to militancy led to mass killings and destruction.
Emergency Laws & Curfews	12	High. Limits freedom of movement and assembly. Used extensively during Boko Haram crises and election violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boko Haram Emergency Rule (2013–2015): Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa placed under emergency rule, restricting civic activities. - COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions (2020): Used to crack down on protests and dissent. - Kano Curfew (2023 Election): Imposed to prevent post-election protests.

Mass Arrests & Detentions	14	High	Arbitrary arrests of journalists, activists, and opposition leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Omoyele Sowore Arrest (2019): Arrested for organizing the #RevolutionNow protest. - El-Zakzaky Detention (2015-Present): IMN leader detained without trial after the Zaria Massacre. - Eromosele Adene Arrest (2020): Arrested for supporting #EndSARS protests.
Internet & Social Media Restrictions	5	High	Direct attack on freedom of speech and press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Twitter Ban (2021): Government blocked access to Twitter after it deleted Buhari's tweet. - Cybercrime Act (2015): Used to arrest activists for online criticism. - NSCDC's Online Speech Crackdown (2023): Police arrested critics for "cyberstalking" under vague laws.
Censorship & Media Suppression	11	High	Journalists face intimidation, arrests, or even physical attacks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DAAR Communications Shutdown (2019): Media houses AIT and RayPower were suspended for alleged bias. - Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Fines (2020): TV stations fined for covering #EndSARS protests. - Jones Abiri Arrest (2016, 2018): Investigative journalist detained without trial for reporting on oil-related corruption.

<p>Banning of Protests & Public Gatherings</p>	<p>9</p>	<p>High</p> <p>Protest permits denied, public demonstrations violently suppressed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fuel Subsidy Protests (2012): Police used force against demonstrators. - #EndSARS Protests (2020): Authorities banned protests, leading to violent crackdowns. - Election Protests in Kano (2023): Police dispersed demonstrators challenging election results.
<p>Counterterrorism Laws Targeting Activists</p>	<p>7</p>	<p>High</p> <p>Terrorism charges used against peaceful protesters and critics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activists Labeled as Terrorists (2016): Amnesty International accused authorities of using terror laws against civil society. - Sowore Charged with Treason (2019): Prosecuted for calling for peaceful protests. - FinSpy Spyware Scandal (2013): Used to monitor journalists and activists.
<p>Surveillance & Digital Monitoring</p>	<p>6</p>	<p>High</p> <p>Government tracking of activists and journalists, suppressing dissent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) Orders (2021): Telecoms instructed to track critics. - Social Media Monitoring Unit (2022): Set up to track “anti-government” narratives.
<p>Negotiations & Dialogue with Armed Groups</p>	<p>4</p>	<p>Low</p> <p>Infrequent approach: sometimes leads to temporary peace but is not commonly used.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boko Haram Amnesty Offers (2011, 2013, 2018): Attempts to negotiate, but with limited success. - Niger Delta Amnesty Program (2009): Led to disarmament of militants. - Bandit Peace Deals (2019-2021): Some states negotiated with bandits, often without lasting results.

Judicial Reforms & Special Tribunals	3	Low Rarely prioritizes accountability for security forces accused of abuses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EndSARS Judicial Panels (2020-2021): Established but most recommendations were ignored. - Human Rights Commission Inquiries (2018, 2022): Limited government action despite reports of abuses. - Election Tribunals (2007, 2011, 2019, 2023): Focused on vote disputes rather than security accountability.
Police & Military Reforms	5	Medium Often promises of reforms are made after public outcry but with little real implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Police Reform Bill (2020): Passed after #EndSARS but with no significant impact. - Military Reorganization (2015, 2021): Leadership changes in response to insecurity but no systemic reform. - SARS Disbandment (2020): Special Anti-Robbery Squad disbanded, but police brutality continues under new units.

From this table, the Nigerian government's most common responses to insecurity are heavily militarised, repressive, and restrictive. Instead of promoting long-term stability, these policies have created an environment where civic space is unsafe, heavily monitored, and systematically suppressed.

Excerpt of How Government Responses to Insecurity Have Made Civic Space Relatively Unsafe

- 1. Militarization of Public Spaces:** Deploying military forces during civil protests or political events increases violence rather than de-escalating tensions. The Lekki Toll Gate Shooting in 2020 is a clear example of how military intervention in civic matters can lead to human rights abuses. Initially, the protests were peaceful, driven by demands for an end to police brutality. However, as the movement gained traction, authorities used national security concerns as a justification for violent suppression. Protesters were labelled as threats to stability, leading to military interventions such as the Lekki Toll Gate shooting. In the weeks that followed, numerous civic space restrictions emerged: activists' bank accounts were frozen, travel bans were issued, and digital censorship was intensified. These actions were not responses to genuine security threats but rather a deliberate strategy to silence dissent under the guise of maintaining order.
- 2. Press Freedom Under Attack:** The consistent use of censorship, fines, and arrests against journalists shows that media is increasingly treated as an enemy rather than a democratic institution. This makes reporting on security issues dangerous and forces journalists into self-censorship.
- 3. Legal Tools to Silence Opposition:** Anti-terrorism laws, cybercrime laws, and sedition charges are frequently used to target activists and opposition voices. These laws are often vague, allowing authorities to criminalize peaceful protests or online criticism.

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- 4. Surveillance & Digital Suppression:** The increasing use of internet shutdowns and online surveillance threatens digital activism, making it risky for citizens to engage in political discourse. For instance, the 2021 Twitter ban was a typical example. The restriction of social media platforms was not about protecting citizens from security threats but about controlling the narrative and limiting avenues for civic engagement. Journalists who reported critically on government actions also faced increased harassment, arrests, and even physical violence, further demonstrating the link between security policies and the erosion of press freedom.

The Unintended Consequences of Security Policies on Civic Space in Nigeria

There are moments when security responses or policies unintentionally impact civic space. The design of such policies was not originally intended to restrict civil liberties but, during implementation, had some unintended consequences which directly affected civic space. This reality is largely shaped by five interrelated factors: **security overreach, lack of oversight, vaguely defined laws, government-citizen distrust, and a militarized approach to governance.**

- 1. Overreach in the Name of Security:** One of the most common ways security policies restrict civic space is through excessive force applied by security agencies whenever they are discharging their duty, even when handling peaceful demonstrations. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 serve as a critical example. Initially, the movement was a call to end police brutality, yet the government's response escalated tensions rather than resolving grievances.
- 2. Lack of Clear Oversight and Safeguards:** Another key factor in the shrinking of civic space is the absence of robust oversight mechanisms

to regulate security measures and prevent their abuse. Many security policies are implemented with little transparency and no clear redress mechanisms for victims. A striking example of this was the Twitter ban in 2021, which was justified as a national security measure but had profound implications for civic freedoms. The ban disproportionately affected youth movements, journalists, and civil society organizations that rely on social media for advocacy and mobilization. Despite public outcry, the decision was enforced without a clear legal process, highlighting the lack of institutional safeguards against digital repression. In the absence of judicial oversight or legislative checks, security decisions like these remain unchecked, further emboldening authoritarian governance tendencies.

3. **Vague or Broadly Defined Security Laws:** One of the most damaging ways security policies impact civic freedoms is through ambiguous legal frameworks that allow authorities to criminalise legitimate dissent under the pretence of security enforcement. A notable example is the Cybercrime Act of 2015, which contains loosely defined provisions on cyberstalking, terrorism-related speech, and online misinformation. While the law was introduced to combat internet fraud and online extremism, its provisions have been used to arrest journalists, intimidate activists, and silence whistleblowers. For instance, several journalists and online commentators have been detained under the Cybercrime Act for publishing reports the seemingly not in alignment with the government of the day. Security agencies have selectively applied the law to prosecute critics while turning a blind eye to state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda. This selective enforcement not only undermines press freedom but also weakens public trust in the rule of law. The broad nature of these security laws gives authorities unchecked discretion, making it easier to criminalise activism, protest, and online discourse. As a result, citizens often self-censor out of fear of legal repercussions, further eroding democratic participation.
4. **Lack of Trust Between Government and Citizens:** A deep-rooted distrust between Nigerian citizens and the government has exacerbated the unintended consequences of security policies on civic space. Over time,

repeated security abuses, mass arrests, and extrajudicial actions have led the public to perceive security measures not as tools for national stability but as instruments of political control. The emergency rule in the Northeast (2013–2015) highlights how security measures, even, when necessary, can foster fear and resentment. The government imposed curfews and movement restrictions to combat Boko Haram insurgents, yet these measures also led to human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, and restrictions on press freedom. While some of these actions were intended to curb terrorist activities, the lack of accountability for security forces and the indiscriminate targeting of civilians further alienated communities, making it easier for extremist groups to recruit disenfranchised youth. This cycle of mistrust fuels resistance to security initiatives, as citizens often view them as oppressive rather than protective.

5. **Militarization Over Governance: The Policy Gap:** At the heart of these issues is the Nigerian government’s over-reliance on militarisation rather than governance reforms to address security challenges. Instead of tackling the root causes of insecurity, such as unemployment, inequality, and institutional weaknesses—the government repeatedly turns to force-based responses that restrict civil liberties. A review of security responses in the Fourth Republic (Table 2) highlights this pattern:

Government Response	Security Goal	Impact on Civic Liberties
Military Deployment & Crackdowns	Suppress insurgents, protests, or unrest	Leads to mass killings, arbitrary detentions, and fear in communities
Emergency Laws & Curfews	Control movement in conflict areas	Restricts freedom of movement and assembly

Mass Arrests & Detentions	Intimidate protesters and activists	Weakens opposition, stifles political participation
Internet & Social Media Restrictions	Prevent mobilization of dissent	Suppresses digital activism, silences journalists
Censorship & Media Suppression	Control public narratives	Limits access to accurate information
Protest Bans & Assembly Restrictions	Prevent instability	Criminalizes peaceful dissent, discourages civic engagement

This security-first approach has created a governance gap, where short-term stability comes at the cost of long-term democratic resilience. Instead of implementing inclusive security policies that build citizen trust, the government's reliance on force and repression has weakened institutions, eroded civic engagement, and fueled further instability. If the current trend of using security policies to suppress civic space continues, the result will not be lasting security, but deeper instability—as repression fuels discontent and distrust.

The Question of Balance between National Security and Civic Space in Nigeria Still Exists!

The trends from the previous analysis and findings reveal an important reality: **security governance in Nigeria is one of the primary determinants of civic space freedom**. It is undeniable that governments have a responsibility to ensure national security and protect citizens from threats like terrorism, insurgency, and civil unrest. However, as seen in Nigeria's security governance trends, policies intended to enhance security often inadvertently shrink civic space and limit democratic freedom. *The key challenge, therefore, is how to strike a balance between national security and civic space, ensuring that responses to insecurity do not undermine democracy and fundamental human rights.*

Oftentimes, the tension between national security and civic freedoms is presented as an unavoidable trade-off, meanwhile, a balanced approach is possible. Achieving this equilibrium requires deliberate reforms, transparency, and accountability, ensuring that security policies do not undermine democratic principles.

For Nigeria to safeguard both security and civic space, five key strategies must be prioritized:



Nigerians do not have to choose between security and civic freedoms – both can coexist if security policies are designed with accountability, transparency, and human rights safeguards. Undoubtedly, if security governance prioritizes engagement, oversight, and rights-respecting reforms, Nigeria can achieve both national security and a thriving civic space.

1. **Rights-Respecting Security Laws: The Need for Clear Legal Boundaries:** One of the primary reasons security measures have been misused in Nigeria is the broad and ambiguous nature of security laws, allowing authorities unfettered discretion in their interpretation and application. Without well-defined legal safeguards, these laws often become instruments for silencing dissent, curbing press freedoms, and justifying arbitrary detentions.

USA PATRIOT ACT CASE STUDY

The USA PATRIOT Act, introduced after the 9/11 attacks, provides a critical lesson on the dangers of security laws that lack oversight. Initially, the Act expanded government surveillance powers, enabling intelligence agencies to monitor citizens' communications without requiring detailed judicial approval. However, as concerns grew about mass surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties, significant revisions were made. By 2015, the USA FREEDOM Act was passed, placing restrictions on the bulk collection of phone records and reinforcing judicial oversight over counterterrorism surveillance operations.

For Nigeria, a similar revision of security laws, such as the Cybercrime Act and the Terrorism Prevention Act, is crucial. These laws must clearly define what constitutes cyber offences, anti-terror measures, and protest-related offences while ensuring judicial oversight in their enforcement. Without such safeguards, security agencies will continue to exploit these laws to target journalists, human rights defenders, and political opponents under the guise of maintaining national stability.

2. **Prioritizing Dialogue Over Force: Reducing Militarized Responses:** One of the most damaging aspects of Nigeria's security strategy has

been the immediate deployment of military force in response to civil unrest. This approach has historically led to escalation rather than resolution, further deepening public distrust in the state.

SUDAN'S 2019 PROTEST

A compelling case study of an alternative approach comes from Sudan's 2019 protests, which initially began as a response to economic hardships but soon transformed into a broader pro-democracy movement. The Sudanese military, instead of resorting to sustained repression, engaged in negotiations with protest leaders and civil society organizations. These talks led to a power-sharing agreement between the military and the civilian opposition, setting the stage for a transition toward democratic governance.

Nigeria can learn from Sudan's experience by institutionalizing structured dialogue mechanisms between security agencies and civil society. Rather than militarized crackdowns, security forces should prioritize engagement, negotiation, and de-escalation tactics when handling public protests. Security response protocols should include pre-protest dialogue meetings, where authorities, organizers, and human rights groups can agree on ground rules that respect both public order and civic freedoms. Without such reforms, the cycle of violent crackdowns and retaliatory protests will continue to destabilize the country.

- 3. Strengthening Civilian Oversight of Security Agencies: Ending Impunity for Abuses:** One of the greatest obstacles to fair and accountable security governance in Nigeria is the culture of impunity within security institutions. In most cases of police brutality, arbitrary arrests, and military excesses, there is little or no accountability for those responsible. This lack of oversight has fueled a pattern of abuses, where officers act without fear of consequences.

UNITED KINGDOM'S INDEPENDENT OFFICE FOR POLICE CONDUCT (IOPC)

EXAMPLE

A powerful example of an effective oversight mechanism is the United Kingdom's Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), which was established to investigate complaints against the police and ensure misconduct cases are addressed independently. The IOPC operates with legal autonomy from law enforcement agencies, ensuring that cases of police abuse, wrongful shootings, and rights violations are reviewed transparently. Reports are made public, and officers found guilty of misconduct face disciplinary measures, prosecution, or dismissal.

Nigeria must adopt a similar framework by establishing an independent security oversight commission with the mandate to investigate security-related human rights violations. This body must be separate from the police and military and should have the power to prosecute security officers implicated in extrajudicial killings, torture, and unlawful detentions. Unless security agencies are held accountable for abuses, trust between citizens and the state will remain fractured.

- 4. Establishing Safeguards for Digital and Media Freedoms: Ensuring Open Democratic Space:** In an era where digital activism and independent journalism play a crucial role in governance, the Nigerian government's restrictive approach to digital rights has significantly undermined freedom of expression. The repeated use of internet shutdowns, social media bans, and legal intimidation against journalists demonstrates a troubling trend of digital repression.

Germany's Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) Case Study

Germany's Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) presents an example of a digital security law that balances national security with press freedom. In-

troduced to combat extremist online content, the law requires social media companies to remove hate speech and incitement to violence within 24 hours. However, clear safeguards were introduced to prevent the law from being used to suppress political dissent or journalistic work. Independent regulatory bodies, rather than government officials, oversee the enforcement of the law, ensuring due process is followed before content removal or penalties are imposed.

Nigeria must develop transparent and rights-based digital regulations that target harmful online content without enabling state censorship. Policies must explicitly prevent government interference in independent journalism and ensure judicial review mechanisms exist before digital platforms are restricted. Without such safeguards, the digital space will continue to shrink, stifling the voices of civil society and activists.

- 5. Investing in Community-Based Security Approaches: A People-Centered Model:** One of the most effective long-term solutions to Nigeria's security challenges is shifting from a state-centric model to a community-led security approach. The reliance on military crackdowns and mass arrests often ignores the root causes of insecurity, such as economic deprivation, youth unemployment, and weak governance structures.

Kenya's Nyumba Kumi initiative offers a case study on how localized security frameworks can foster trust and collaboration between citizens and the state. Introduced as a community policing model, Nyumba Kumi encourages residents to organize themselves into neighbourhood units, working closely with local authorities to identify security threats before they escalate. This proactive model has been instrumental in preventing crime, reducing police abuses, and building community trust.

For Nigeria, adopting a community-driven security strategy would involve integrating local leaders, youth groups, and civil society organizations into security planning processes. Instead of deploying military forces to suppress protests or unrest, security forces should support grassroots initiatives that foster civic participation, economic opportunities, and early warning mechanisms against violence. By empowering local communities, security measures can be more responsive to citizens' needs while preserving civic freedoms.

Balancing national security and civic space requires a fundamental shift in Nigeria's security governance approach. This balance is not impossible, but it demands deliberate policy reforms, strengthened oversight, and investment in community resilience.

Germany's NetzDG law balances security and press freedom. Nigeria needs transparent digital regulations to prevent censorship. Kenya's Nyumba Kumi model highlights community-led security. Nigeria should adopt grassroots strategies, empowering local leaders to tackle insecurity while fostering civic trust and participation.



Key Finding 4

The Most and Least Secure States: Jigawa, Ekiti, Osun, Abia, and Kwara rank as Nigeria's safest states, while the Southwest remains relatively stable; there are still pockets of violence.

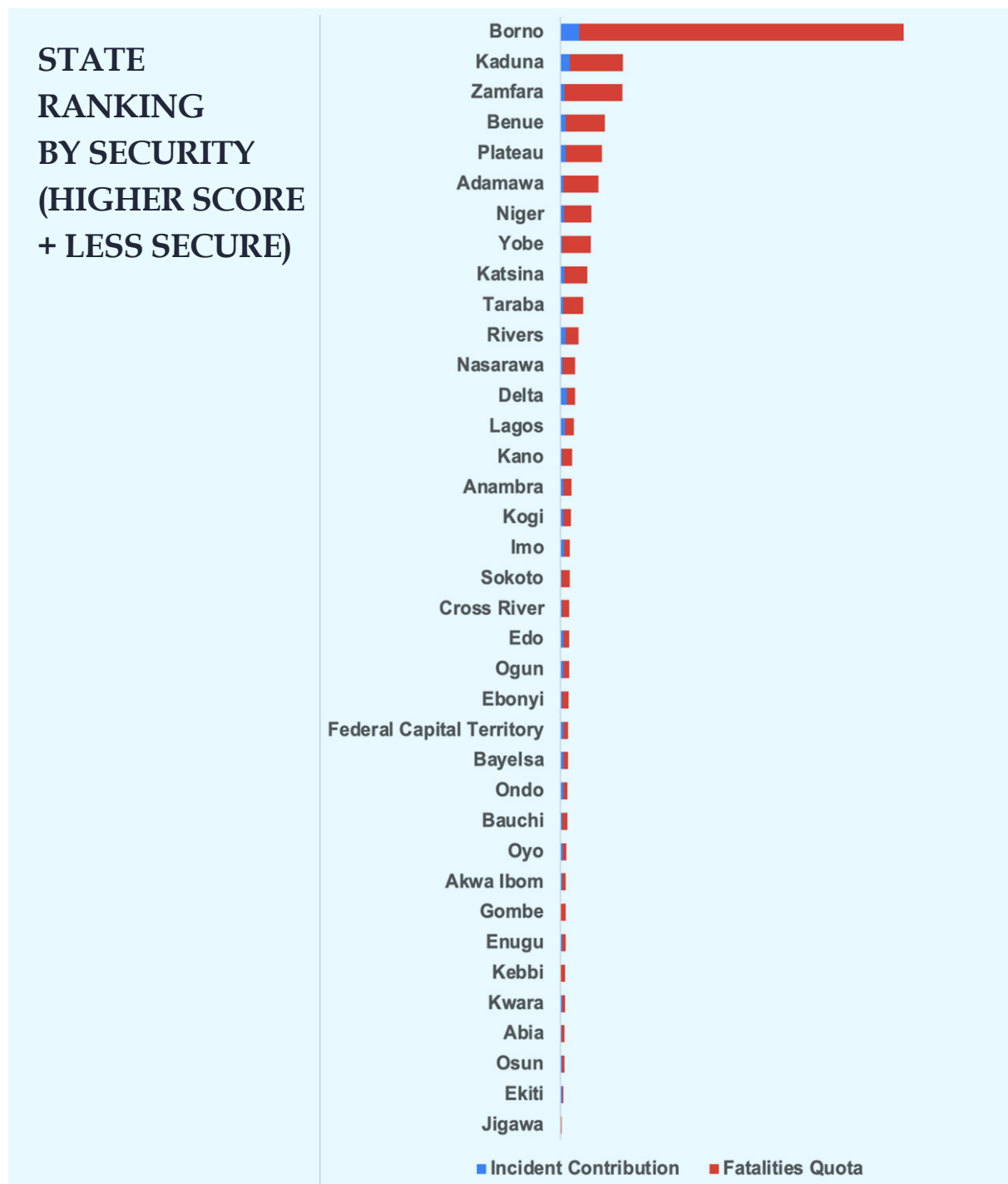
Mapping Security in Nigeria: Understanding the Most and Least Secure States and Geopolitical Zones

Security in Nigeria is a complex and evolving issue, shaped by a multitude of factors ranging from terrorism and insurgency to communal clashes, organized crime, and political violence. Understanding the relative security of different states and geopolitical zones requires a systematic and data-driven approach that accounts for both the frequency of security incidents and their severity. To achieve this, a structured ranking framework was developed to assess the security landscape across Nigeria, offering a comparative analysis of state and regional security conditions.

The methodology employed ensures that the ranking does not simply reflect the sheer number of security events recorded in a particular state or region but also integrates a deeper analysis of their consequences and impact. Security conditions are not only shaped by how often incidents occur but also by their magnitude, disruptiveness, and the extent of human casualties they cause. A state experiencing frequent but low-intensity security breaches may not necessarily be as insecure as one where fewer, but highly deadly incidents take place. To address this complexity, a composite scoring system was used to generate a more balanced and comprehensive assessment of insecurity trends across the country.

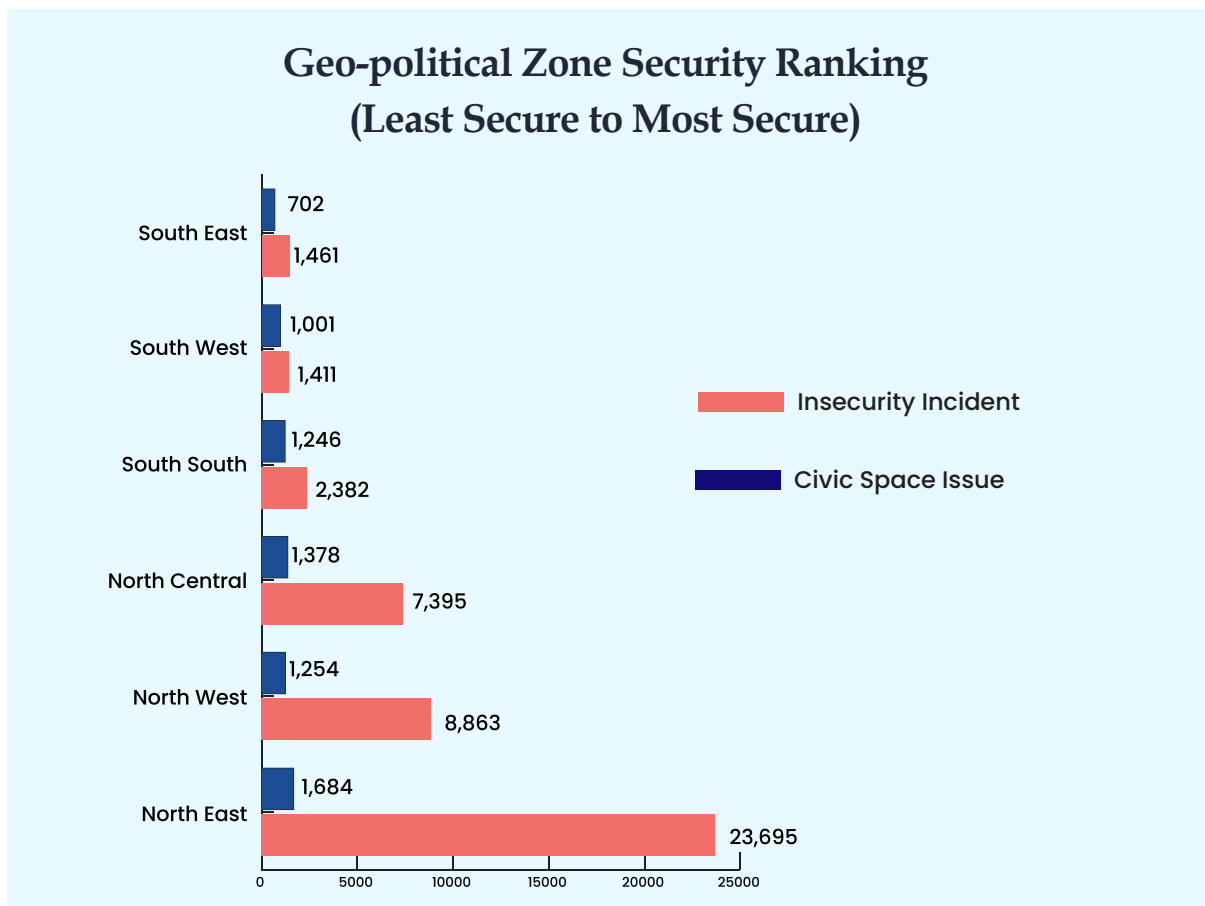
The ranking serves several critical functions. It provides policymakers with

empirical data to inform strategic security interventions, ensures that resources for law enforcement and humanitarian aid are allocated effectively, and enhances public awareness by making security trends accessible to citizens. Additionally, it offers a valuable research tool for scholars, advocacy groups, and security analysts, allowing them to track patterns over time and assess the effectiveness of different security policies. By analyzing security trends at both the state and geopolitical zone levels, the ranking offers a nuanced perspective on the evolving security landscape in Nigeria.



Based on the ranking done with over 13 years of Nigerian security data, **Jigawa, Ekiti, Osun, Abia, and Kwara** emerge as Nigeria’s safest states, showing significantly lower security risks relative to other states. These states exhibit greater stability and fewer disruptive security threats, making them less prone to the widespread violence affecting other parts of the country. Their combined security scores reflect a lower frequency of high-impact incidents, suggesting lower levels of organised criminal activity, and more effective community-based security structures.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, states such as **Kaduna, Zamfara, Benue, Plateau, and Borno** rank as the most insecure, with Borno standing out as an extreme case. These states have been consistently plagued by violent insurgencies, armed banditry, communal conflicts, and large-scale attacks that result in high numbers of casualties. Borno, in particular, records an alarmingly high-security risk profile, driven by a prolonged insurgency, coordinated attacks by non-state armed groups, and persistent instability. The state’s overwhelming security burden is evident from its ranking score, which far exceeds that of any other state.



he security ranking at the geopolitical zone level provides a broader view of regional stability, revealing marked disparities in security conditions across different parts of the country. The **South East** emerges as the least insecure region, with a relatively lower burden of large-scale violence compared to other regions. The **South West** follows closely behind, demonstrating relative stability that aligns with the individual rankings of its component states. While both regions experience incidents related to political violence, crime, and separatist movements, they have fewer high-casualty events and better containment mechanisms that limit the escalation of insecurity.

In contrast, the **North Central, North West, and North East regions** exhibit far higher security risks. The North Central region, characterised by communal clashes, farmer-herder conflicts, and inter-ethnic violence, records a significant volume of security incidents, many of which result in fluctuating but often severe casualties. Similarly, the North West is heavily affected by banditry, mass kidnappings, and organised armed groups, contributing to its high-security ranking. The North East remains Nigeria's most insecure region, reflecting the prolonged impact of terrorism and insurgency, which has led to devastating losses over the years.

Key Insights and Implications:

A closer analysis of the ranking reveals critical insights into the relationship between governance, security, and regional stability. The states with the highest levels of insecurity are often those where non-state actors have a significant presence, law enforcement struggles with operational capacity, and local conflicts remain unresolved. The presence of terrorist organisations, armed militias, and heavily armed criminal groups significantly elevates the security risks in affected regions. Furthermore, states where security institutions lack strong oversight mechanisms tend to exhibit higher incidences of human rights violations and retaliatory violence, further deepening instability.

On the other hand, the states that rank as the most secure share certain

common features, including effective community policing structures, stronger socio-political cohesion, and a lower prevalence of organized crime networks. Their security scores suggest lower exposure to mass violence and a greater capacity for conflict resolution, which contributes to better overall security outcomes.

The data also underscores the importance of adopting region-specific security strategies rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. The nature of security threats varies significantly across Nigeria, with terrorism dominating the North East, banditry affecting the North West, communal conflicts destabilizing the North Central, and political violence shaping security concerns in the South. Effective interventions must be tailored to these unique security dynamics, ensuring that security measures address both the frequency and severity of security threats in each region.

Mapping Nigeria's Civic Space: Assessing Restrictions Across States and Regions

The strength of civic space in any society is a key indicator of democratic resilience, public engagement, and the ability of citizens to participate in governance without fear of repression. In Nigeria, the state of civic space varies significantly across regions, influenced by security dynamics, political stability, law enforcement practices, and broader socio-economic conditions. To better understand these variations, a Civil Space Index was developed, ranking states and geopolitical zones based on the extent of civic space restrictions.

This analysis goes beyond simply counting incidents of civic space violations; it incorporates a multi-variable approach that considers the intensity, frequency, and impact of restrictions, ensuring a more comprehensive assessment. Civic space is not only shaped by the number of documented incidents but also by the severity of their consequences, including loss of

life, suppression of rights, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms. The ranking offers critical insights into where civic freedoms are most protected and where they are under the greatest threat, helping to inform advocacy efforts, guide policy interventions, and strengthen democratic governance.

States with the Least and Most Restricted Civic Space

From the index, states such as **Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kebbi, Taraba, and Yobe** emerge as the least affected by civic space restrictions, indicating a more open and tolerant environment for civil liberties. These states exhibit lower instances of civic space violations and a relatively minimal impact on citizens' ability to organize, express dissent, or participate in governance without interference. Their lower combined scores suggest fewer reported cases of press suppression, restrictions on protests, and crackdowns on civil society organizations.

Conversely, **Kaduna, Borno, Zamfara, Niger, Plateau, and Benue** rank as the states with the most restricted civic space, reflecting significant levels of suppression, restrictions on movement and assembly, and threats to civic actors. Kaduna, which records the highest restriction score, has experienced frequent detention of activists and other forms of restrictions, compounded by high levels of insecurity that limit civic participation.

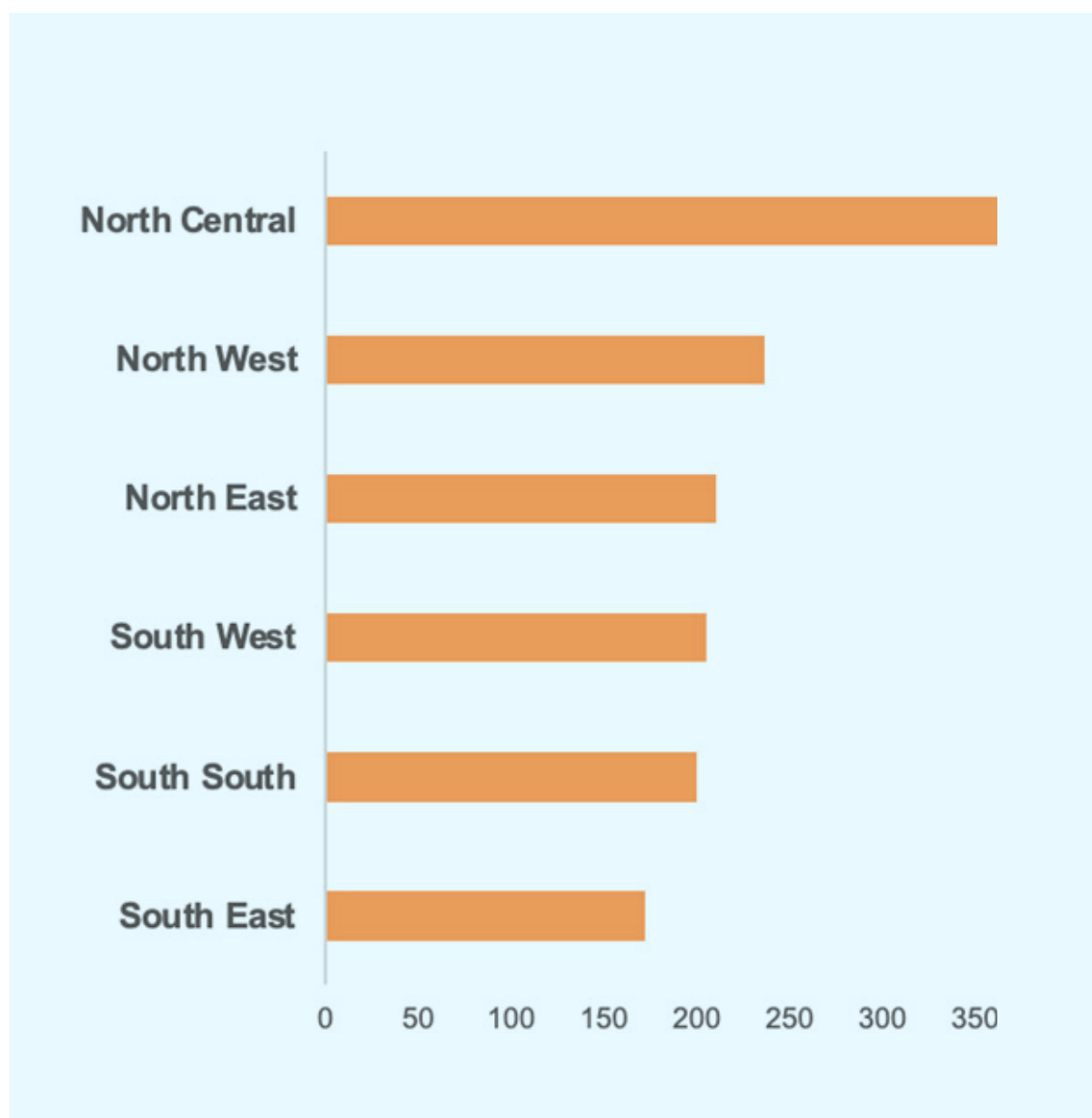
Borno and Zamfara, which have long struggled with insurgency and armed conflicts, also score alarmingly high on civic space restrictions, driven by government-imposed security measures, military interventions, and emergency laws that limit civic engagement. These states exemplify the impact of conflict-induced restrictions on civil liberties, where heightened security concerns often lead to increased government control over public discourse and movement.

Geo-political Zone Security Ranking (Least Secure to Most Secure)



Regional Trends in Civic Space Restrictions

At the regional level, the North Central emerges as the most affected geopolitical zone, recording the highest level of civic space restrictions across Nigeria. This trend is linked to frequent communal clashes, heightened military presence, and crackdowns on protests and dissent. Civil society organizations and the media in this region have faced intimidation, legal restrictions, and suppression, limiting their ability to operate freely.



The North West follows closely behind, with severe restrictions on civil liberties due to the high prevalence of banditry, kidnappings, and state-imposed security measures. Frequent shutdowns of communication services, movement restrictions, and arbitrary arrests of activists and journalists have contributed to the erosion of civic space in the region.

The North East, despite being the epicentre of the insurgency, ranks lower in civic space restrictions compared to the North Central and North West. While the region still experiences significant restrictions due to counterinsurgency operations, there is some level of civil society resilience and international engagement that helps to mitigate absolute suppression.

In contrast, the South East, South South, and South West record the lowest levels of civic space restrictions, indicating relatively greater freedom for civil society organizations, media, and public engagement. While these regions experience incidents of political violence, protests, and security-related crackdowns, they also benefit from stronger civic institutions, higher levels of media freedom, and more active citizen participation in governance.



Key Insights and Implications:

The Civil Space Index highlights the direct correlation between insecurity and civic space restrictions. In states where armed conflicts, insurgency, or political instability are prevalent, the likelihood of civic space repression is significantly higher. Security concerns often serve as justifications for increased government control, including restrictions on protests, press freedom, and civil society activities.

However, while security threats influence civic space, state responses also play a defining role. Some states with moderate security challenges have nonetheless maintained more open civic spaces, while others with less severe security risks have exhibited high levels of repression. This suggests that beyond security concerns, political leadership, governance style, and law enforcement practices significantly shape civic space conditions.

The ranking also underscores the importance of legal protections and institutional safeguards. States that have stronger legal protections for civil liberties, an independent judiciary, and active civil society engagement tend to experience fewer restrictions on civic space. In contrast, regions where security forces operate with unchecked authority and where dissent is routinely suppressed exhibit the highest civic space restrictions.





Key Finding 5

The Future of Civil Space in Nigeria: Civic restrictions are set to rise yearly, hitting 1,846 cases by 2029 if no reforms are made

As civic space in Nigeria continues to shrink under the weight of security challenges, political repression, and restrictive policies, forecasting its future trajectory becomes crucial for understanding and mitigating emerging threats to democratic freedoms. The ability to predict the patterns of civic restrictions and security incidents allows policymakers, civil society organizations, and human rights advocates to anticipate risks, design effective interventions, and push for necessary reforms before further deterioration occurs.

Using advanced time-series forecasting techniques, this study employs the AutoRegressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) statistical model to project the future landscape of civic space restrictions and security-related incidents in Nigeria from 2025 to 2029. To develop this predictive model, a structured data analysis pipeline was implemented, leveraging the analytical and statistical tools of Python's libraries for data preprocessing, numerical operations, and data visualization. The core forecasting process was executed using the ARIMA model from the statsmodels library, an advanced technique widely used in econometrics and time-series analysis.

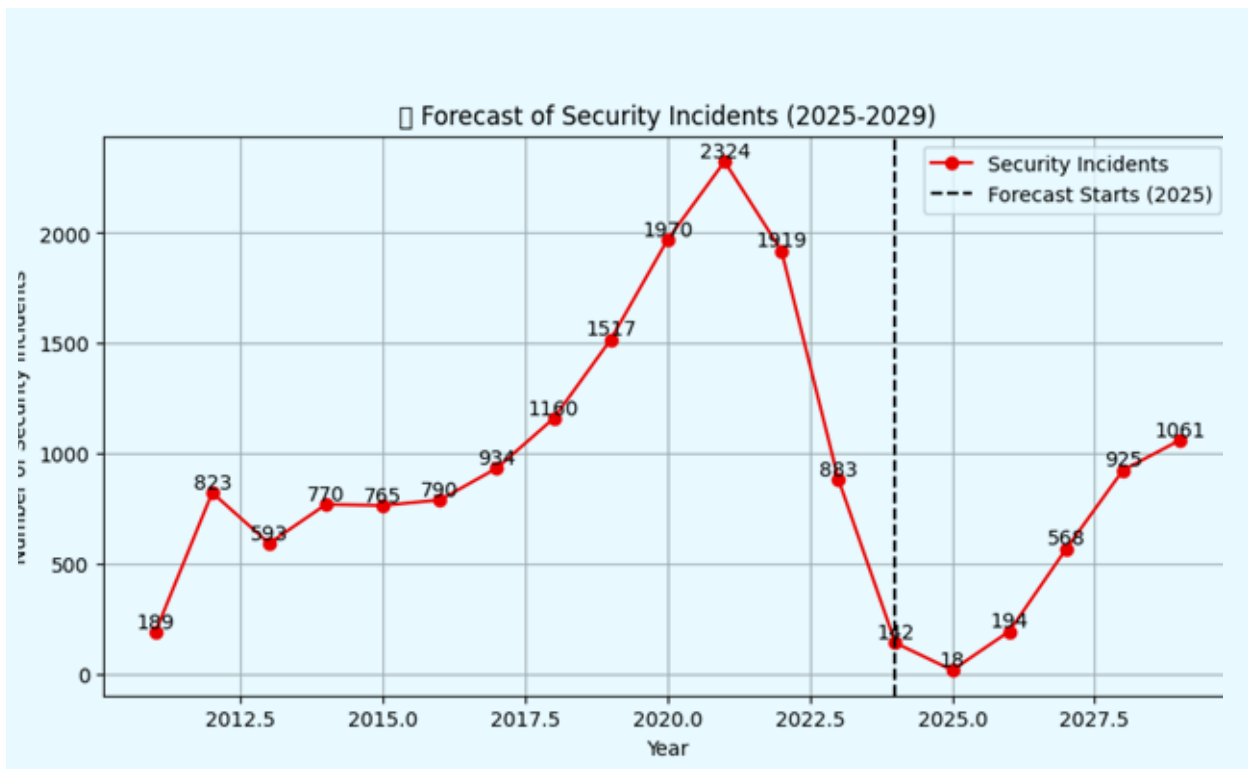
The ARIMA model operates by combining three fundamental components:

- **AutoRegressive (AR) Terms:** This component leverages past values within the dataset to predict future observations, assuming that historical trends influence upcoming events.
- **Integrated (I) Component:** Differencing techniques are applied to the dataset to remove underlying trends and make the series stationary, ensuring that fluctuations in past observations do not distort predictions.

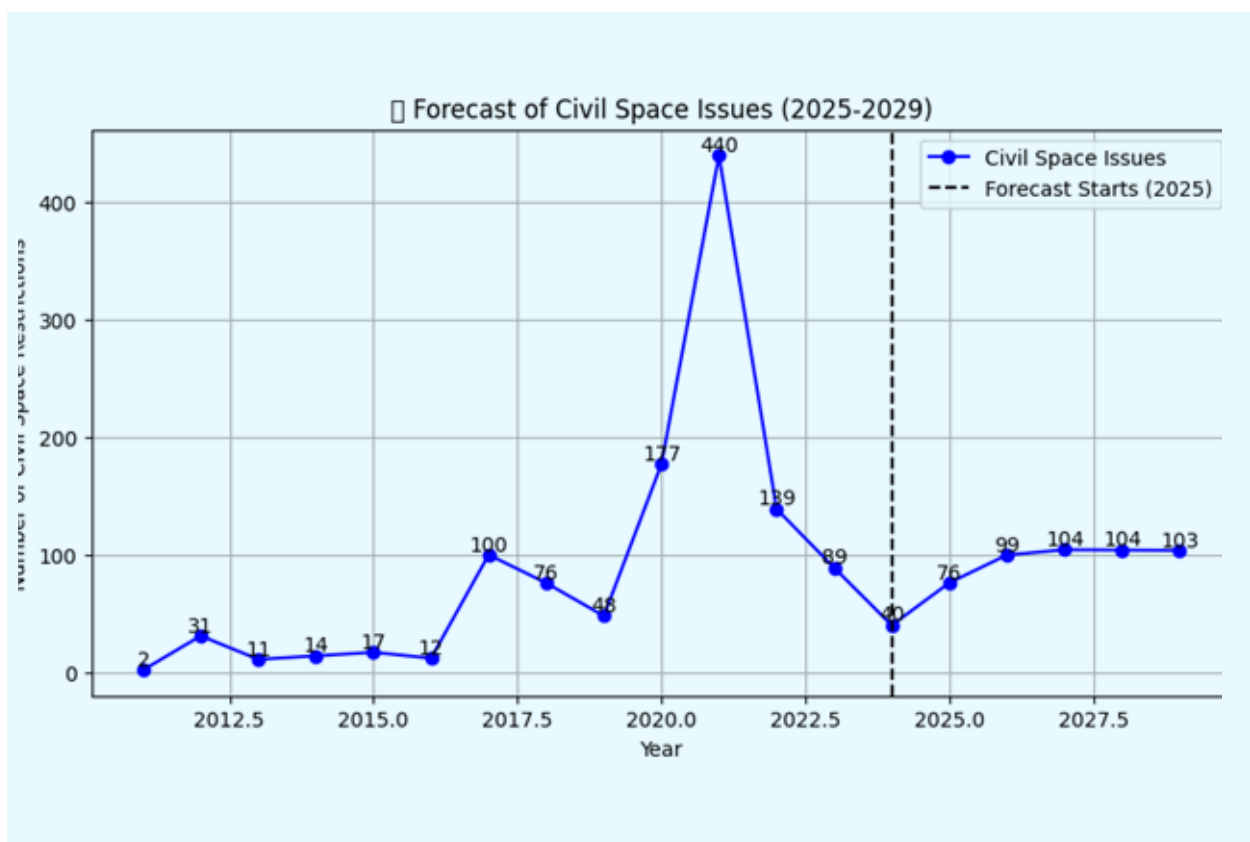
- **Moving Average (MA) Process:** The model captures past forecast errors and integrates them to enhance prediction accuracy, reducing noise from outlier events.

For this study, an ARIMA (2,1,2) model was selected based on rigorous testing, ensuring that it effectively captured underlying patterns in security incidents and civic space violations. The model was separately trained on both datasets to independently predict security-related incidents and civic space restrictions over the next five years. The results indicate a continued rise in civic space violations, with an estimated *1,846 recorded cases by 2029 if no significant reforms are implemented*. Similarly, security-related incidents are expected to remain persistent, reinforcing the connection between civic space suppression and overall insecurity.

Forecasting the Future: The Persistence of Civic Restrictions and Security Challenges



The forecasted trajectory for security incidents between 2025 and 2029 reveals a fluctuating but sustained trend in violent events and disturbances. While there is an initial drop in 2025 (with only 18 predicted incidents), the numbers surge again in the following years, reaching 1,061 incidents by 2029 if the current situation remains constant. The erratic nature of the predictions suggests that Nigeria’s security landscape remains volatile, influenced by cyclical patterns of unrest, insurgency, and government responses.



Similarly, the projection of civic space violations paints a concerning picture. By 2025, the model predicts 76 cases of civic space restrictions, climbing to 104 incidents per year from 2027 onward. This steady increase suggests that the suppression of civil liberties is set to become a normalised feature of Nigeria’s governance framework unless deliberate reforms are enacted to reverse the trend.

Key Insights:

The Road Ahead for Nigeria's Civic Space:

The findings from this predictive model suggest that, under current conditions, civic restrictions and security challenges will continue to evolve in tandem, reinforcing each other in a self-perpetuating cycle. The historical data indicates that periods of heightened security incidents often correlate with an increase in civic space violations, reflecting how governments frequently respond to instability with repressive measures such as restrictions on protests, media crackdowns, and arbitrary arrests of activists.

Furthermore, the projected figures underscore the inadequacy of existing policy frameworks and security interventions in addressing the root causes of civic space repression. If governance and law enforcement strategies remain unchanged, the steady erosion of civic freedoms will likely continue, affecting freedom of expression, association, and public participation in governance.

This forecast serves as a crucial warning: without targeted legal and institutional reforms, the restrictions on civic space in Nigeria will become more deeply entrenched, limiting avenues for democratic engagement and citizen oversight of government actions. There is an urgent need to rethink security approaches, strengthen judicial safeguards for human rights, and foster a political environment that prioritizes inclusivity and participatory governance.

As Nigeria moves towards the next decade, the challenge is not just to monitor civic space restrictions but to actively intervene in reversing the trajectory. Without decisive reforms, the projections indicate a future where democratic freedoms are increasingly constrained, dissent is systematically silenced, and civil society's role in governance is significantly weakened. The time for action is now.

■ 06.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions

The study presents a comprehensive analysis of Nigeria's civic space, detailing the escalation of restrictions on civil liberties, the interplay between security incidents and civic space violations, and the forecasted trajectory if no interventions are made. The findings underscore the alarming trend of increasing civic restrictions, with projections estimating up to 1,846 recorded cases by 2029 under current policy and security conditions. The data further reveals that regions with higher insecurity also experience greater suppression of civic freedoms, demonstrating a cyclical relationship between state responses to unrest and the contraction of democratic spaces.

The Civil Space Index by state and geopolitical zone highlights North Central as the most affected region, followed by the North West and North East, while the South East remains the least affected. This regional disparity suggests that civic space suppression is not uniform but is influenced by localized security conditions, governance structures, and enforcement policies.

The time-series forecasting using the ARIMA(2,1,2) model confirms that both security incidents and civic restrictions will persist if no proactive reforms are made. The projected fluctuations in security events suggest continued volatility, while civic space restrictions are forecasted to stabilize at a high level, signalling a long-term normalization of suppression tactics.

If Nigeria continues on its current trajectory, the erosion of civil liberties will become institutionalized, further weakening democratic accountability, increasing public distrust in governance, and potentially fueling cycles of unrest. Immediate, multi-stakeholder interventions are required to reverse this trend and ensure that civic space remains open, resilient, and protected.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, specific recommendations are outlined for relevant stakeholders, each playing a crucial role in reversing the shrinking of civic space, improving governance accountability, and fostering democratic resilience in Nigeria.

1. Nigerian Government and Security Agencies

Key Findings Addressed: Increasing civic space restrictions, the correlation between security incidents and repression, and regional disparities in civic freedoms.

- **Implement Legal and Policy Reforms to Safeguard Civic Space:** The government should revise laws that disproportionately restrict freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Immediate priority should be given to amending the Cybercrimes Act, the Public Order Act, and sections of the Criminal Code used to suppress civic activities.
- **Adopt Human Rights-Based Approaches in Security Operations:** Security agencies must shift from a militarized response to civic expressions and adopt de-escalation techniques that respect fundamental rights. Law enforcement personnel should be trained on UN Guidelines on the Use of Force to ensure proportionate responses to protests and public gatherings.
- **Enhance Transparency and Oversight in Security Operations:** To rebuild public trust, security agencies must publish incident reports on human rights compliance, allowing independent bodies to audit enforcement actions taken during civic protests and demonstrations.
- **Prioritize Conflict Prevention in Hotspot Regions:** Given the regional disparities in civic restrictions, the government should establish regional peacebuilding initiatives in high-risk zones such as North Central, North West, and North East, focusing on alternative dispute resolution and conflict mediation mechanisms.

2. National and State Legislatures

Key Findings Addressed: Weak legal protections for civic freedoms, lack of checks on security overreach, ineffective parliamentary oversight.

- **Strengthen Legislative Oversight of Security Agencies:** The National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly should enforce regular public hearings on civic space violations, requiring security agencies to justify their actions and provide remedies for unlawful crackdowns.
- **Pass Legislative Frameworks to Protect Protest Rights:** A Civic Space Protection Bill should be enacted, explicitly guaranteeing the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of the press, and protection for human rights defenders.
- **Mandate Periodic Assessments of Civic Space Conditions:** Legislators should commission biannual reports on the state of civic freedoms in Nigeria, integrating input from civil society, media organizations, and security agencies.

3. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Human Rights Groups

Key Findings Addressed: Growing threats to civil liberties, inadequate advocacy on civic restrictions, and limited public awareness.

- **Enhance Civic Education and Public Awareness Campaigns:** CSOs must educate citizens on their rights, particularly in regions experiencing high restrictions, ensuring that individuals are equipped with legal literacy and knowledge of protective mechanisms.
- **Strengthen Strategic Litigation to Challenge Civic Space Violations:** Legal advocacy groups should expand strategic litigation efforts, challenging unlawful detentions, media crackdowns, and assembly restrictions through domestic courts and regional human rights bodies.
- **Develop a Civic Space Early Warning and Monitoring System:** CSOs should collaborate to establish a real-time monitoring system that flags civic space violations, ensuring rapid response mechanisms in

cases of arbitrary arrests, crackdowns, or enforced disappearances.

4. International Development Partners and Diplomatic Missions

Key Findings Addressed: Global accountability gaps, weak pressure on Nigeria to uphold civic freedoms, lack of sustained funding for civic space initiatives.

- **Strengthen Conditional Diplomatic Engagement on Civic Space Protection:** International partners should tie governance support and security cooperation agreements to Nigeria's compliance with human rights obligations, leveraging diplomatic influence to encourage legislative and security sector reforms.
- **Expand Funding for Civic Space Protection Programs:** More financial and technical support should be directed to local CSOs, legal aid organizations, and independent media, ensuring sustainable advocacy and accountability efforts.
- **Encourage International Investigations into Major Violations:** Global bodies such as the UN, ECOWAS, and AU should commission independent investigations into cases of unlawful crackdowns, ensuring that perpetrators of civic space violations are held accountable.

5. Media Organizations and Journalists

Key Findings Addressed: Suppression of press freedom, censorship of civic activism, misinformation contributing to civic space restrictions.

- **Strengthen Investigative Journalism on Civic Space Violations:** Media organizations must invest resources into in-depth reporting on civic restrictions, documenting patterns of repression, security overreach, and grassroots resistance movements.
- **Advocate for Legal Protections for Journalists and Media Houses:** Press unions should lobby for stronger legislative protections, preventing the harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary arrests of journalists reporting on civic issues.
- **Expand Fact-Checking and Counter-Misinformation Campaigns:**

Given the role of misinformation in justifying civic space restrictions, media organizations should partner with CSOs to debunk state propaganda and disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting activists and human rights defenders.

6. Judiciary and Legal Institutions

Key Findings Addressed: Arbitrary arrests and prosecutions, lack of legal redress for civic space violations, judicial complicity in rights suppression.

- **Strengthen Judicial Independence and Due Process Protections:** The judiciary must resist executive interference in politically motivated cases and ensure expedited hearings for activists and human rights defenders unlawfully detained.
- **Develop Special Legal Mechanisms to Address Civic Space Cases:** Establishing specialized human rights courts or civic space tribunals would create an expedited legal process for cases involving violations of fundamental freedoms.
- **Enhance Proactive Legal Safeguards Against Repressive Laws:** Judges and legal practitioners should interpret restrictive laws in a manner that upholds constitutional protections, setting legal precedents that favour civic freedoms.

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