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The State and Erosion of the Civic Space in Nigeria's Democracy, 1999–2023

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's experience with democratic rule since 1999 has been somewhat contradictory. Rather than a widening of the civic space for robust citizen participation, there have been sustained attempts by the state to suffocate the civic space by stifling differing viewpoints. The government has led the process by securitizing the civic space, criminalizing civil dissent, and politicizing civil society platforms. Although there appears to have been a global trend towards the shrinking of the civic space, the situation in Nigeria has been typically enervating for fostering the democratic culture. Sequel to this, this paper examined the state of the civic space and civil society in Nigeria vis-à-vis the continued onslaught by the state since the country's Fourth Republic began in 1999. This is with a view to ascertaining their robustness and capacity to provide a bulwark against excessive state intrusion and ensure a deepening of democracy. Through analysis of primary and secondary data, we demonstrated how the civic space in Nigeria has been embattled as a result of the restrictive policies and legislations by which the government aimed at usurping, suppressing, infiltrating and controlling it during the focal period. We further demonstrated that government's erosion of the civic space has led to a widening of the activities of uncivil society groupings resulting in the ambience of insecurity that presently pervades the country.

Keywords: Civic space, Civil society, Democracy, Democratization, Uncivil society

Introduction

Democracy is globally acknowledged as an open and liberal system. It is a civil order wherein the citizenry occupies a pivotal place in civic affairs. A democratic polity is, essentially, an amalgam of the state and the civil populace (Okoli, 2003). Essentially, the state exists at the instance of the civil populace just as the citizenry exists as the legitimate heirs of the state. The spheres of the state and the civil populace coordinate within a civic

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space, a domain where the activities of both are mutually mediated in a manner that serves the public good. The civic space represents the organic context in which civil society takes on its essence and substance. It embodies the totality of physical, virtual, institutional, legal and political conditions underlying the organizing and functioning of civil society in a polity (Keutgen & Dodsworth, 2020). Such conditions differ from one country to another, depending on the peculiarities of the prevailing state-civil society relations. And the state of the civic space in a country is a critical predictor of its fate and prospects in relation to the sustenance of the civil order and entrenchment of the democratic culture.

Nigeria's civic space has been an irony of a sort. In spite of the country's perennial experience with civil rule, all is not well with her democracy (Okoli & Atelhe, 2008; Okoli, 2009; Okoli & Otegwu, 2010; Okoli & Orinya, 2013; Osayi, 2015). Rather than blossoming, the country's civic space appears to have witnessed continuous systemic shrinking in recent years. According to Global Rights [GR] (2020, p. 2), "more than 20 years after the end of military rule, the nation still struggles to define and embrace its tenets of democracy". While it has witnessed 7 successive elections to date, the country "still struggles with constructing a culture of democracy and fostering a vibrant space for civil society's participation in governance". Under the Mohammadu Buhari administration (2015-2023), the repression of rights became acute and attempts by the regime to stifle the civic space and gag dissent assumed a worrisome dimension.

Since 2015, there have been attempts by the government to stifle the civic space by imposing restrictive measures, laws and policies. Deliberate efforts have been made by the government to weaken civil society actors, which are perceptibly critical of, or antagonistic to, its activities. Viewpoints which the government considers hostile were attacked, and civil dissent was repressed. The government led the process by securitizing the civic space, criminalizing civil dissent, and politicizing civil society platforms. Human Rights Watch [HRW] (2022) highlighted the seven-month ban on Twitter (June 2021–January 2022) after the social media company deleted a tweet by President Muhammed Buhari for violating its rules, as signaling a worsening repression of fundamental rights in the country.

In effect, Nigeria's civic space profile has been negative on several metrics. *Afrobarometer* (2019) ranked Nigeria far below the continental average (4 out of 20) in terms of trajectories of associational freedoms in Africa (Logan & Penar, 2019). The 2020 Free Press Index ranked Nigeria 115 out of 180 countries surveyed (Sahara Reporters, April 26, 2020). Similarly, the 2021 world's Rule of Law Index ranked Nigeria as 121 out of 139 (The World Justice Project, 2021). Equally, Freedom House's Freedom in the World report (2021) placed Nigeria at 45 out of 100. More importantly, the CIVICUS, 2019 Civic Space Index had classified Nigeria among the poorly performing countries with 'repressed' civic space. The country has remained in the same ranking category for four consecutive years from 2019 to 2022. The notion of 'repressed' designates a civic space that is extremely contested and utterly under pressure. It is the second worst possibility based on CIVICUS' five-standard criteria, namely 'open', 'narrowed', 'obstructed', 'repressed', or 'closed' (CIVICUS, 2022).

Deriving from the foregoing, the civic space in Nigeria has been systematically emasculated by the government through restrictive laws, policies and actions that stymie popular activism, civil liberties and free democratic participation. The government has principally resorted to both cooptation and coercion in order to undermine the civic space. In some instances, the government has simply infiltrated the space in order to subvert the activities of civil society actors. Besides excesses of government, there are non-state forces that threaten the existence and safe functioning of civil society in the country.

Scholarship on civic space in Nigeria has been rich and ebullient (Ikelegbe, 2013; Ayegbusi, 2019; Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2021). Most of the existing works in this regard have

raised concerns regarding the incremental shrinking of the civic space, especially since the advent of the Buhari-led administration in 2015 ([Spaces for Change \[S4C\], 2020](#); [Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2021](#); [Stakeholder for Democracy Networks \[SDN\], 2021](#)). Although there seems to be a consensus among scholars and analysts to the effect that the civic space is under threat, largely as a result of the arbitrariness of the government, there has not been much field-based inquiry on the nature and manifestations of the prevailing threats as well as their impact and implications. Also, extant studies have been grossly inadequate with regard to exploring policy and practical implications of the shrinking civic space with a view to proffering actionable recommendations. Most importantly, the prevailing episteme on the subject matter tends to have focused rather disproportionately on state-based threats to civic space (GR, 2020; [Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2021](#); [Ibezim-Ohaeri & Nwodo, 2022](#)), with scant attention on the equally significant non-state factors that contribute to the shrinking space syndrome.

This paper examines the prevailing threats within the civic space in North Central Nigeria with a view to ascertaining how the threats affect the functioning of frontline civil society actors in that context as well as exploring opportunities for mitigating and transcending such threats. The focus on North Central Nigeria is instructive considering the high incidence and prevalence of civic space violations in the region. According to the dataset of World Justice Project [WJP],¹ North Central Nigeria has recorded a total of 170 incidents of such violations from 2015 to date (as at February 25, 2022). With this record, the region is taking a clear lead in terms of regional occurrence of civic space violations in the country.

The cardinal proposition of the paper is that the civic space in North Central Nigeria has been shrinking amidst its nominal, ostensible expansion, as a result of state and non-state encumbrances that limit the operations of civil society actors. Specifically, the paper attempts to proffer answers to the following questions: What is the state of civic space in North Central Nigeria? Who are the critical stakeholders of the space? What forms of threat exist in the space? Which civil society actors are commonly at risk? In which specific ways do the identified threats affect the functioning of the focal actors? How do the affected actors sustain their operations in spite of the prevailing threats? What would be the opportunities for mitigating and transcending the threats? How can the civic space in the focal area be transformed in order to leverage conditions for civil dynamism and liberalism, as well as democratic participation?

Contextual and methodological notes

This paper is an outcome of a field-based study carried out through December, 2021 and February, 2022 in all the states of Nigeria's North Central geopolitical zone. The zone comprises Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, plus the Federal Capital territory (Abuja). Available data indicate that this region has accounted for the highest incidents of civic space violations in the country in recent times (see [Table 1](#)). The purpose of the research is to explore the state of the civic space and civil society in the region from the standpoint of the threats that effect their functioning with a view to making recommendations.

Although the research covered the afore-mentioned states, it largely focused on the urban and peri-urban centers of the states where most of the targeted civil society actors are

¹ <https://closingspaces.org>; see also [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Regional Incidences of Civic Space Violation in Nigeria.

Region	Number of Incidents
North Central	170
South West	108
South East	69
South-South	60
North West	46
North East	19

Source: Closing Spaces in Nigeria @<https://closingspaces.org>

concentrated. All the states were equitably represented in the research through a controlled purposive sampling procedure ($Cps = / > 10$),² although Abuja was accorded highest level of coverage in view of the high concentration of civil society activities there.

Substantively, the study focused on the Buhari-led civilian administration, which came to power in 2015 and stayed at its helm till May, 2023. This period is significant based on the fact that 2015 marked the beginning of the fifth dispensation of a continuous democratic regime (Fourth Republic) that started in 1999. More importantly, the electoral politics of 2015 witnessed a remarkable outcome, evidenced in the attainment of the first democratic alternation of power in Nigeria's electoral democracy. Among other facts, that signified a period of democratic maturation and consolidation for the country, with the expectation that the civic space in the country would have also witnessed a concomitant progressive transformation. Curiously, the outcome of the research tends to point to the contrary, as the era seems to have witnessed persistent retrogression in terms of civic participation (Omilusi, 2015). Indications³ were rife that the Buhari-led government has been one of the most intolerant in terms of amenability to civil ethos.

The study is a combination of aspects of desk and field research. The primary research was based on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and random field discussions/⁴ study chats⁵ with select stakeholders within the civic space, including organizational and individual stakeholders drawn from the media, academia, organized labour, relevant interest groups and individual activists. The mode of interface with the field participants (interlocutors and informants) varied from direct physical interview/conversations to email/GSM mediated correspondences. The participants for KIIs and field discussions/study chats were purposively determined and selected based on researcher's informed discretion and adroit application of the snow-balling technique. The snow-balling technique enabled the researcher to identify new interviewees/interlocutors from the initial field contacts, and then increase the numbers based on subsequent contacts.

The desk component of the study was based on exploration of relevant scholarly and policy-based works on the subject matter with a view to drawing vital insights and inferences. In this regard, relevant data and information were sourced from library, documentary, media and internet (re)sources. The proceeds of the desk and field research were synthesized into a qualitative analysis that is thematically presented in keeping with the research objectives/questions. The thrust of the analysis follows the logic of textual cum contextual engagement with desk resources as well as interpretative narrative of field data,

² Target coverage per State (excluding Abuja beat) was equal to, or greater than 10. This target was met in all beats except Niger State where the initial field study plans were foiled by the commissioned researcher, necessitating an impromptu remedy by the lead researcher.

³ Corroborated anecdotes and insights from random field discussions confirm this position.

⁴ This consisted in random and privatized conversations with research facilitators and other relevant contacts on the various research beats; it was furthered via GSM correspondences beyond the field intercourse.

⁵ Ibid.

with relevant diagrammatical and tabular illustrations. It is expected that the substance of this paper will engender actionable insights capable of informing as well as guiding policy and programmatic interventions on relevant issues pertaining to the subject matter.

Situating civic space and civil society

Civic space refers to the operational context of civil society. It consists of the physical, virtual, legal and political context of civil society in a political system. The space encompasses the institutions, practices, laws, values, processes and relations that underpin the operations of civil society in a polity (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017). The civic space provides the citizenry with a platform to organize, mobilize, and participate in civic affairs towards influencing the outcomes thereof (Spaces for Change [S4C], 2020; Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam, 2022).

The importance of the civic space cannot be overemphasized. To be sure, the state of the civic space in a polity determines its governance effectiveness. In effect, a robust civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. And in doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state abides by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions (Keutgen & Dodsworth, 2020). An open civic space is one that is amenable to the tripartite freedoms: lawful expression, association and assembly. This is a desideratum in a democracy. As CIVICUS (2023) rightly observes:

Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. These are the three key rights that civil society depends upon.⁶

The relationship between the civic space and civil society is such that the latter cannot be understood in isolation of the former. The civic space constitutes the foundation, and the material basis, upon which civil society is built. What then is civil society (CS)? According to Ikelegbe (2005, p. 243), "CS comprises self-autonomous and non-state associations that are voluntarily constituted, self-generating, self-supporting and self-governing". Essentially, CS constitutes formal, established non-state platforms by which the civil populace seeks to organize, mobilize, network, collaborate and cooperate in various spheres of interest in order to facilitate the governance and development processes of society. More elaborately,

Civil society is actually a formation of the organized social life of citizens, the sphere of social life outside the state, in which voluntary autonomous groups compete, collaborate and cooperate over interests and preferences. It is the network of institutions by which citizens represent themselves, a realm of

⁶ <https://monitor.civicus.org/whatis-civicspace/>

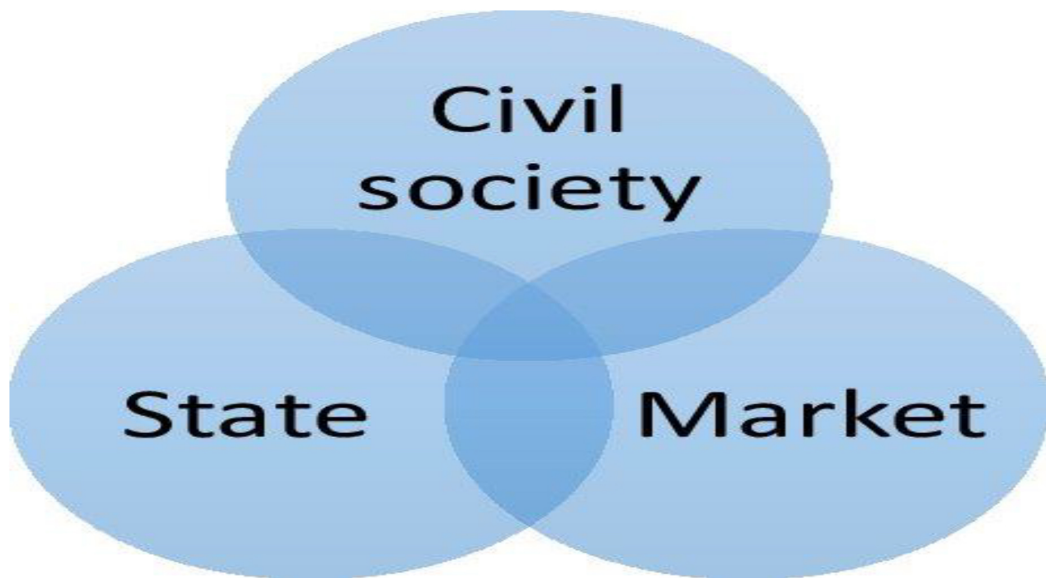


Fig. 1. Civil society and the wider society.

Source: Designed by the researchers (2022).

associational solidarity, activism and engagement, and a site of collective civic and public action. It is further a theatre of discourse, debates, deliberation and exchange of public affairs (Ikelegbe, 2013, p. 6).

The autonomy of CS is not sovereign. It exists and functions within legal and political jurisdictions whose lawful dictates must be obeyed. In that context, CS is expected to operate voluntarily and freely, without any structural hindrances from the state and its forces. The functional autonomy of CS imposes on its actors the responsibility of being civil and law-abiding. Hence, their mandate, agency and autonomy are expected to be exercised circumspectly within the ambit of the law in their operational jurisdictions.

CS is a crucial component of the global democratic civilization (Moksnes & Melin, 2017). Thereof, it constitutes a ‘critical mass’ (Walker & Thomson, 2008) that straddles the state and the market (Fig. 1). It mediates betwixt the two spheres in a manner that makes for a mutual, cross-regulating balance. Suffice it to say that state-civil relations in the contemporary world have been contested at best. This is a result of the usurpation of the former by the latter within the context of growing democratic illiberalism and a shrinking of the civic space (Malena, 2015).

Although there is no universally acceptable conception of civil society organizations (CSOs), the following predictors (cf. Action Aid Nigeria, 2007, p. 26) has been adopted as working conceptual principles in this paper:

- Private sector actors that deal with non-profit activities;
- The sector of society concerned with community interests;
- A necessary part of governance structure that is different from the state and that checks and balances to other components of that structure;
- Groups of people who convene and work autonomously without state control to facilitate progress at all levels especially the grassroots;
- Independent organizations of people that seek effective governance and promoting popular participation.

Theorizing Nigeria's shrinking and embattled civic space syndrome

The notion of the shrinking of Nigeria's civic space could be said to be symptomatic of the persistent de-democratizing tendencies in the country. This trend can be conjectured from three important lenses, namely: the elite capture, civil apathism, and democratic illiberalism. Each of these lenses provides an explanatory perspective to the phenomenon of shrinking civic space based on some basic assumptions.

The elite capture perspective sees the shrinking civic space as a consequence of the seizure and abusive control of the civic space by the dominant elites. This implies the cooption, corruption, usurpation and pervasion of the civic space by the elites in order to perpetrate their vested self-regarding interests in the democratic process (Okoli, 2022). A key informant⁷ in Abuja rightly opined that democracy in the country has been 'arrested' by the elites. The elite capture of the civic space has been exemplified by the highjacking of the space by the dominant, privileged political oligarchy through the strategies of structural cooption and infiltration. The elites have coopted the space by inducing and cajoling civil society platforms, relying on the instrumentality of political patronage. The purpose of this is to compromise the platforms and make them amenable to partisan purposes. The elites have also infiltrated the civic space by sponsoring false or fake civil society platforms, intended to adulterate the activities of the legitimate ones. Sometimes, factional or dissident movements are instigated by the elites from the existing organizations in order to undermine the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the latter.

From the lens of civil apathism, the shrinking civic space in Nigeria can be explained as a consequence of people's apathetic orientation towards civic engagements. Civic apathy is a common tendency in parochial political cultures, where the citizenry generally exhibits a withdrawal stance towards politics and civic affairs (Okoye, 1999; Okoli, 2003). In such contexts, citizens are less inclined to democratic participation and civil activism. The shrinking space syndrome is, therefore, an inevitable outcome of the inability of the civil populace to assume their rightful democratic mandate and hold the government to account.

The democratic illiberalism thesis holds that electoral democracies in some climes have the proclivity for either backsliding or autocratic relapse (Fareed, 1997). Illiberal democracies are thus characterized by de-democratizing tendencies, such as state repression, dearth of rule of law, human rights violations, and restrictions of civil liberties. They are pseudo-democracies whose civic domains are closed and are averse to free and popular participation (cf. Osayi, 2015; Omilusi, 2015). In such systems, the civic space is not only contested, it is actually emasculated.

How do the foregoing postulations apply to the Nigerian situation? Putting differently, how can these hypothetical claims help our understanding of the closing civic space in Nigeria? These salient analytical posers constitute the main concern of the discourse in the subsequent thematic segments.

The state of civic space in Nigeria

Generally, Nigeria's civic space has been variously described or characterized as 'politicized' (Action Aid Nigeria, 2007), 'securitized' (Spaces for Change [S4C], 2020), 'shrinking' (Agwuegbo, 2021), 'contested' (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2021), and 'strangled' (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Nwodo, 2022). The implication of these semantic notions is that the civic space in

⁷ Field discussions with Ambassador Onoja in Abuja, January 2022.

Table 2. Dimensions of Threats to Civic Space in Nigeria.

Instance of Threat	Remark(s)
Restrictive Legislations and Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2020 Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) that grants the federal government the right to meddle with the establishment, finances, and operations of CSOs (see Sections 831; 839(1); 839(2); and 842(2a-b) &(5-6).• 2015 Cybercrimes (prohibition, prevention, etc.) Act, which technically erodes freedom of expression (see Section 24) and cyber privacy (Section 38).• 2014 Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), which limits the right to sexual liberty and identity, and excludes LGBT and allied groups from civic protection.
Restrictive Proposed Bills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• NGOs Bill.• Social Media Bill.• Hate Speech Bill.• The Journalism Enhancement Bill.• Note: All of these proposed bills contain obnoxious clauses that hold critical implications for civic activism and democratic participation.
Prohibitive Executive Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Harassment of the media: invasion of media firms, attacks on journalists, unlawful arrest and detention of journalists, etc.• Militarization of elections: the military and armored police personnel have been deployed to securitize elections.• Restriction and criminalization of civil dissent: for instance, #EndSars protests were brutally clamped down by the state security operatives.• Twitter Ban: the indefinite suspension of Twitter operations in Nigeria on June 4, 2021.• Proscription of lawful assembly: the Islamic Movement in Nigeria has been proscribed by the Federal Government while its supreme leader has been unlawfully detained since 2015, in spite of several court orders to release him on bail.• Proscription of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) on charges of terrorism.
Police Brutality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activists, journalists, opposition politicians, unionists, columnists and publicists have been unlawfully arrested, detained and brutalized.
Phantom Spying and Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vocal and critical public commentators, religious leaders, unionists and pro-democracy vanguards have been invited over by the Department of State Services (DSS).
Sundry excesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Violation of court orders, unlawful killings and incarcerations, enforced disappearances, irregular trials and prosecution.

Source: Authors' compilation with information from [Global Rights \[GR\] \(2020\)](#); [Ibezim-Ohaeri & Nwodo \(2022\)](#).

Nigeria is not as free and healthy as it should be, owing to multiplicity of structural and circumstantial threats. [Table 2](#) is instructive in this regard.

By and large, the civic space in Nigeria can rightly be described as suppressed and emasculated. This presupposes that the structure is in place, although its freeness and viability have been negated by an avalanche of systemic impediments. Most of these impediments have arisen from the actions of the governmental agents which undermine the operational efficiency of the civil society actors that play within the space. In the next segment of the paper, an effort is made to comprehensively explore the major threats that civil society entities operating in the focal area have faced, based on the insights from the field study.

Observed threats to civic space in Nigeria

Scholarly and policy conversations on the shrinking civic space in Nigeria have, more or less, focused rather asymmetrically on the state-borne threats to the space. As a

point of departure in this paper, it is posited that although the state-borne threats are fundamental and decisive, a variety of non-state factors also contribute to the closing civic space in Nigeria. From the standpoint of the core findings of the field study, such factors could be broadly considered under a number of themes (Table 3). Suffice it to note that the prevailing threats to civic space in Nigeria vary from one context to another. Although there are cross-cutting threats experienced in all parts of the country, there are state- or region-specific experiences that can only be meaningfully appreciated by considering their contextual specifics and dynamics. Our focus on North Central Nigeria is, among other things, intended to bring out some of these salient contextual realities in a manner that leverages case-specific empirical insights capable of enriching the extant knowledge.

State repression of civic space

State repression was widely reported in the focal area. It has occurred in a variety of ways, including the use of public security operatives to persecute CS actors or disrupt their activities. The police, military, as well as the Department of State Services (DSS) have been used to intimidate and persecute SC actors. This pattern of threat has been common within Abuja, and a number of instances will be instructive:

- In June, 2015, Mohammed Atta-Kafin-Dangi, a journalist with Radio Nigeria was attacked by the police in Abuja for attempting to cover a protest by commercial motorcyclists in the city.
- In 2019, the Abuja office of Daily Trust was invaded, raided and ransacked by men of the DSS, the army and the police, over a publication relating to counter-terrorism operations in the North East.
- In 2020, #EndSars protesters were harassed, arrested and detained by the DSS and the police.
- In 2021, Tordue Alem, a journalist and Vanguard Newspaper correspondent attached with the National Assembly was reported missing, and latter confirmed dead in a controversial circumstance.⁸
- The Abuja chapter of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) revealed that there have been incessant cases of press freedom violations in the FCT since 2015.⁹
- The authorities of University of Abuja suspended the branch chairman of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) over his role in prosecuting the 2020 industrial action in the university.
- In November 2021, the office of Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) in Abuja was invaded and ransacked by the operatives of DSS over unclassified security charge.

In Nasarawa State, government-sponsored thugs¹⁰ were used to disrupt the #EndSars protests in Lafia. In some instance, government vigilante, composed of 'area boys' and thugs,¹¹ have been used to harass public protesters. The use of government 'taskforce' to molest the public and obstruct lawful assembly was also reported in Benue, Kwara and Niger States.¹² Apart from violating the rights of the citizenry, task forces were known

⁸ Some circumstantial evidence tends to suggest that he was assassinated in the context of a politically motivated torture.

⁹ Study chats with Comrade Ochiaka Ugwu, the Secretary of Abuja NUJ Council.

¹⁰ Author's personal observation, Lafia, October-November, 2020.

¹¹ This was witnessed sparingly in some parts of Abuja during the #EndSars protests.

¹² Corroborated anecdotes and interviews, field study, January- February 2022.

Table 3. Key findings on prevailing threats to civic space in Nigeria.

Pattern of Threat	Manifestations	Remark(s)
State repression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police and military brutality • Phantom spying by secret services • Criminalization and proscription of dissent • Attacks on CS actors/organizations • Unlawful Intimidation, harassment, arrests, and detention of activists • Disruption and subversion of protests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There have been enforced disappearances, unlawful spying, bullying, harassment, arrest, detention, torture, incarceration, and killing of activists. • Protests, civil dissent and demonstrations have been forcibly disrupted, subverted, and criminalized. • Media organizations have been invaded and attacked.
Securitization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securitization in the context of counter-terrorism operations • Securitization of public health emergency (Covid-19) lockdown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some CS entities have been labeled and treated as security threats. • Covid-19 exigencies provided the government with a pretext to trample on civic freedoms.
Civic apathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest in politics and democratic participation • Withdrawal stance from civic engagements • Indifference to civil activism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some citizens have withdrawn from civic engagements for fear of being attacked. • Some citizens also believed that their views and stakes do not matter. • Some segments of the civil populace were ignorant of, or indifferent to, their civil rights and obligations.
Operational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of funds • Dearth of operational logistics • Poor networking and linkage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal of legitimate support from the government. • Non-release of counterpart funding.
Actor opportunism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touting and thuggery • Paid activism • Partisan dissent • Fake CSOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pro-government CSOs were sponsored to counter the #EndSars protests. • The #EndSars movement was infiltrated by touts and thugs. • Politicians or their cronies have founded and funded pseudo-CS platforms to advance their vested interests.
Establishmentarian control and persecution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic regimentation • Religious or sectarian orthodoxy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erosion of academic freedom in educational institutions. • Proscription of unions. • Victimization of vocal intellectual-activists or unionists by the authorities of higher institutions. • Internal censorship within media establishments. • Violation of freedom of thought and expression in religious establishments.
Insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent conflict • Crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSO workers or activists have been exposed to violent conflict in their operational areas. • Some of them have been targeted for kidnapping for ransom. • Such threats have forced some CSOs to relocate.
Political and social intolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-opposition • Religious fanaticism • Gender exclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opposition politicians have been arrested and molested by government security agents. • Freedom of thought, of worship, and of religious persuasion have been threatened.

Source: Field Study (December, 2021–February, 2022).

to have engaged in extra-judicial arrests, property seizure, and extortions. Attacks on the critical structures of the civic space were also recorded. In Nasarawa State, the only privately owned radio station, Breeze FM, was demolished by the state government in

2017.¹³ Government sources claimed that the operational site of the radio station lacked due approval by the state authorities. Circumstantial facts around the incident, however, point to the fact that it was a deliberate show-down by the state government which believed that the media outfit was providing its perceived detractors a platform to air anti-government views. It was gathered that the outfit was swiftly demolished (without formal notice) only a day after it granted audience to a crop of labour activists and agitators who utilized the platform to articulate collective interests.¹⁴ Elsewhere in Plateau State, an independent media station, Plateau Jay FM, was shut down by the state government for four months in 2019 on the allegation of airing contents that were inimical to public peace and order. Corroborated anecdotes¹⁵ had it that the ban was politically motivated, in that the state government simply clamped down on a perceptibly antagonistic civic platform that offered the populace alternative views and perspectives on public affairs.

Securitization

Some CS actors have been clamped down by government based on the exigencies of counter-terrorism rhetoric. The rhetoric in this regard is that such actors have posed a dire threat to national security, hence the need to confront them using a maximum force within a framework of an extra-ordinary military intervention. The health emergency arising from COVID-19 provided a veritable pretext for securitization¹⁶ in the focal area. The lockdown regime associated with the crisis was enforced with exceptional arbitrariness. As a result, there were heightened incidences of police brutality, extortions and extra-judicial killings in Abuja and other states of North Central Nigeria. In Lafia, Nasarawa State, a government set up known as Nasarawa State Youth Empowerment Scheme (NAYES), which helped in enforcing the lockdown, exploited the civil populace by collecting bribes in order to enable them evade various lockdown measures.¹⁷

The principle of securitization has enabled the state governors to frame what they please as a security threat and devise exceptional contingency measures towards tackling same. It is legitimately within the purview of their executive powers as chief security officers of their respective states to determine what constitute a threat and how to deal with such. In practice, this has meant unlimited powers at the disposal of the governors, who have often (mis)used such powers to criminalize and liquidate perceived opposition. Governors have capitalized on such powers to even securitize local elections by deploying security operatives in the process. The local council polls conducted in most of the states of the focal area within the focal period have shown this pattern.

Securitization is instantiated by governmental restrictions that are framed around the imperative of national security (Njoku, 2022). It has provided the material premise for the excesses of the state actors within the civic space in Nigeria. Associated with this is the paradox of politicization of security and securitization of politics. According to S4C (*Spaces for Change [S4C]*, 2020, p. 2):

This standard is subjective and gives state actors a wide discretion to determine what threatens national security; the discretionary power (has been) exercised arbitrarily in ways that narrowed the civic space (the bracket is author's).

¹³ Author's personal observation, 2017.

¹⁴ Samson Akwe, former labour leader, journalist and activist, research meeting, December, 2021.

¹⁵ Sideline field conversations, Jos, February 2022.

¹⁶ Dr. Hussaini Abdu, Director CARE International, interview in Abuja, January 2022.

¹⁷ Author's personal experience, April 2020.

Civic apathy and actor opportunism

Civic apathy makes it difficult for the civil populace to organize and mobilize for civic engagements. Actor opportunism is the tendency to get involved in any kind of activism, be they fair or foul, legitimate or illegitimate. Insights from our research meetings and study chats revealed that the civil populace in the focal region is predominantly parochial, apathetic and gullible. They tend to be too withdrawn to make the most of civic participation, or too gullible to participate meaningfully. As an anonymous informant poignantly put it:

You find it a lot difficult working in and for a community that does not even understand what you are doing. This is a populace that does not know the difference between common good and self-regard. And you would wish to expect an objective and meaningful engagement with them on issues?¹⁸

Civic apathy could be as a result of poor literacy level and civic awareness. Illiterate populace bereft of civic orientation is likely to be apathetic to civic affairs, all things being equal. Ngwu & Onah (2023:13) attributed the prevalence of civic apathy to the presence of “some sort of intellectual amnesia” among the intellectuals, which erodes their capacity to “engage actively in public affairs to awaken their respective societies”. Such apathy could also have arisen from the people’s perception of the conduct of those who play on various CSOs platforms. An informant in Minna¹⁹ contended that there is no difference between CSO actors and politicians. He added that most CSO activists merely ‘use the platforms to build their political profile preparatory to defection into full career politics’.²⁰ In that sense, CSOs are merely alternative political platforms. Another informant in Abuja posited that the activists are ‘political opportunists who are desperate for fame and fortune’.²¹ Concerns about the questionable mandate, agency, credibility and legitimacy of some CSO actors have accounted for their negative perception among the populace.

Operational challenges

Although CS activism thrives on volunteerism and self-conviction, it is not a zero-cost endeavor. CSOs need funds and logistics to make good their activities. The result of the field study shows that funding constraint was a critical obstacle to effective operations of CSOs. Apart from denying CSOs financial support in terms of counterpart funding or others, government has also clamped down on the sources of their fund raising. In the Aftermath of the #EndSars protests, for instance, the Federal Government targeted, *Flutterwave*²² the online platform that facilitated fundraising in support of the protests. State governments in the focal region have also denied CSOs logistical supports. For instance, informants in Niger, Kogi, and Plateau reported that their organizations have been declined access to some venues and facilities for programming,²³ often under the pretext of lack of security clearance/ police permit. An informant in Nasarawa revealed that they were once denied access to a venue for which approval had been sought and granted for a public advocacy

¹⁸ Anonymous, study chats in Abuja, February 2022.

¹⁹ Anonymous, interview in Minna, February 2022.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Anonymous, study chats in Abuja, February 2022.

²² Flutterwave is a Nigerian fintech company that provides a payment infrastructure for global merchants and payment service providers across the continent. It facilitated the bulk of the funding transactions in favour of the #EndSars movement.

²³ Corroborated anecdotes.

programme.²⁴ An informant in Niger²⁵ opined that they have been denied access to critical information by state agencies. Challenges such as these hamper the operational efficiency of CSOs. More importantly, they have also put them in a vulnerable position which may be exploited by the government to negotiate their agency and mandate.

Establishmentarian control and persecution

This has to do with the attempt to stymie activism within educational, media or religious establishments. A pastor in Lafia averred that he was posted out of the city for attempting to preach what was called ‘politically sensitive message’.²⁶ The authority of his church had summoned him and cautioned that the pulpit was not meant for civil activism. His ‘intransigence’ resulted in an abrupt decision by the church hierarchy to post him to a distant rural village as a form of punishment in order to deter future occurrence. A journalist with the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) in Makurdi was suspended in 2019 for breaching ‘vested interests’.²⁷ A researcher-scholar²⁸ working for a government institute in Abuja revealed that his scholarship has been heavily censored by the authorities in his establishment. In 2016, the authorities of Federal University of Lafia issued a memoir directing her staff to sign to a secrecy document²⁹ that reads inter alia:

I . . . do solemnly promise that I will not directly or indirectly reveal, except to a person to whom it is my duty or to whom I am authorized to communicate it, any work code, sketch plan, model, article, note, documents or information entrusted to me by any person holding office in the (university) or the public service of the Federal University of Lafia, which I may obtain, or to which I have access, owing to my position as a staff of the (university) . . . [brackets are author’s].

Although the motive of the above memo could be debated, its eroding import for personal and academic freedoms of academics in the institution cannot be contested or denied. Incidentally, many staff acquiesced and signed the controversial document, mostly under duress or pressure. The efforts of the leadership of academic staff union in the school to challenge the secrecy directive brought them into hostility with the university management. In that same university, vocal intellectuals have been summoned and queried in order to intimidate them. In 2020, an academic staff of the university was queried by the management for sharing a ‘toxic’ post capable of ‘breaching peace’³⁰ on a collegial virtual platform called *AKADA-Lafia*. Elsewhere in Kogi State, over 120 members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) were sacked and the union proscribed by the authorities of the state university, following a local industrial dispute.³¹ The union leaders faced mortal threats and were forced into hiding³². Sequel to the prolonged 2020 industrial action embarked on by university academics, the authorities of University of Abuja arbitrarily suspended the chairperson of ASUU in the university over his role in

²⁴ Anonymous, research meeting in Lafia, December 2022.

²⁵ Anonymous, interview, Minna, February 2022.

²⁶ Anonymous, interview in Lafia, January, 2022.

²⁷ Samber Theophilus, Journalist with Bother FM Makurdi, interview in Makurdi, January 2022.

²⁸ Dr Nnaemeka Okereke, interview in Abuja, January, 2022.

²⁹ The document emanating from the Establishment Unit of the institution was authorized by the Registrar.

³⁰ Author’s personal observation, 2020.

³¹ Dr Daniel Gbenga Aina, Former Chairperson, Kogi State University, Ayimgba, interview, February 2022.

³² Ibid.

Table 4. Some Activists charged with treason and other phantom crimes in Nigeria.

Activist	Allegation(s)
Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, has been in custody since he was arrested in December 2015	Terrorism and terror-related conspiracy
Abubakar Sidiq Usman, a blogger, was arrested by EFCC in August 2016 and detained for three days	Cyber stalking
Omoeyele Sowore, a pro-democracy activist, was arrested in August 2019 and has been facing trial	Treasonable felony

Source: Adapted from Ibezim-Ohaeri & Nwodo (2022, pp. 33–35).

prosecuting the strike.³³ Expectedly, the suspension was squashed for lack of merit by the institution's Senate Committee set up to investigate the matter.³⁴

Insecurity

Insecurity has had both objective and subjective implications for the operations of CSOs in the focal area. Insecurity arising from violent conflicts and crimes has limited the operations of CSOs. Some community-based CS actors have had to close operations and relocate to the cities following incessant attacks (robbery and kidnapping) on their personnel.³⁵ It could not be established, however, whether such attacks were targeted at the personnel because of their CSOs engagements, or they were random occurrences that happened to have affected them, incidentally. The efforts by the government to counter insecurity has, invariably, brought about a bigger threat – unlawful persecution and victimization of human rights activists and vanguards. Government has often capitalized on the exigencies of counter-terrorism or counter-criminality to usurp the civic space and violate human rights, rule of law and civic freedoms. Activists have been labeled terrorists or felons and charged with unfounded offences (see Table 4). Such phantom charges have landed many in unlawful arrests, torture, detention, or incarceration. There have been cases of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances of activists as well.

Political and social intolerance

The closing up of civic space in the focal area has been reflected in many facets of political and social relations. The incumbent government has scarcely tolerated political opposition, and prominent political opposition activists have been arrested and molested.³⁶ The gender space has witnessed patriarchal and masculinist hegemonization,³⁷ pushing women to the fringes of politics and economy.³⁸ The religious arena has been threatened by inter-religious intolerance as evidenced in the Hijab crisis in Ilorin.³⁹ The widening social cleavages amidst rising political and gender intolerance in Nigeria is a salient predictor of her closing civic space.

³³ Abdullahi Al-Alamin, Chairperson ASUU Federal University of Lafia, interview, February 2022.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ It is difficult to ascertain for all instances, whether such attacks were occupation-related hazards or random threats.

³⁶ A case in point is Dino Melaye who have been severally arrested and detained by the government security agents.

³⁷ Male biased structures of domination and superordination.

³⁸ Female stakeholders of CSOs interviewed in Jos and Makurdi shared this sentiment.

³⁹ The Ilorin Hijab crisis has been on since 2021, polarizing the already frosty relationship between Muslims and Christians in the state.

Conclusion

The wellness of a democracy is determined by the state of its civic space. A flourishing democracy is characterized, among others, by a robust and dynamic civic space, inhabited by a viable civil society. Democratization has come a long way in Nigeria. In 2015, the country attained a milestone in her democratic experience by recording the first democratic (regime) alternation in her political history. But beyond this historical feat, democracy in Nigeria appears to have become more notional than substantive. Although the Nigerian civic space has witnessed a significant numerical expansion in terms of growth and diversity of civil institutions, sites and activities (Ayegbusi, 2019; Ayegbusi & Rukema, 2021), much is still left to be desired of the viability and dynamism of the space. In effect, despite the fact that the space has nominally expanded over time, it has, substantively, remained both contested and endangered.

The government has, over the years, stifled the civic space by coercing, coopting, infiltrating, subverting, and restricting the activities of civil society actors. This was affirmed by majority of our respondents who reported that they had witnessed or had been victims of state repression of the civic space in the form of forced disappearance, unlawful spying, bullying, harassment, arrest, detention, torture, incarceration, and killing of civil society activists. They also reported wide occurrences of forcible disruption of peaceful demonstrations, subversion and outright criminalization of legitimate civil society engagements as well as attacks on the media and civil society platforms. A key conclusion is that the securitization of the public domain in the country in view of her national security challenges has provided the alibi for the continuous closing of the civic space by the government. The government has also pursued criminalization and politicization of civil society as a strategy for undermining their functionality. Aside direct and indirect governmental encumbrances, the opportunistic tendencies inherent in some civil society platforms have also negated their operational efficiency and viability. In other words, there are also certain internal contradictions within the civil society movement in Nigeria such as lack of commitment to core values by some of the actors, weak intellectual inputs, excessive focus on donor funding, and intra-civil society rivalries that equally pose a threat to the wellness of the civic space and civil society in the country. The implication of the foregoing is that the Nigerian civic space has been, more or less, shrinking or retarding in spite of its ostensible expansion over the years. This has given rise to the paradox of an 'overdeveloped democracy' that is bereft of a solid civic foundation. In order to roll back the abusive influence of the state and reclaim the vanishing civic spaces, we recommend that the civil society movement in Nigeria should deliberately forge alliances and build coalitions with other civic groupings, particularly the country's organic intellectuals, youth organizations, and the organized labor to awaken the mass of the citizens to act as a counter-weight against intrusive state power and also hold the operators of the state to account for the utilization of public resources. This is because, it is largely their unrestrained access to the public purse that emboldens the state actors to use state power to suppress and oppress the civil populace for whom they hold their power in trust thereby leading to the shrinking of the civic space in a supposedly democratic state.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest on the part of all the authors.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Author contribution

A.C.O. contributed to the Conceptualization, Project Administration and Funding acquisition. A.C.O., E.C.N. contributed to the Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Writing – Original Draft. F.N.O., A.C.O. contributed to the Software and Investigation. Onah contributed to the Validation, Data curation, and Writing – Review & Editing. E.C.N., A.C.O., F.N.O. contributed to the Resources. E.C.N. contributed to the Supervision.

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