UJJPS **University of Jos Journal of Political Science**

E-ISSN: 1595-4765 | Volume 3, Issue 3 | September 2026

Nigerian Democracy in Recession: Overcoming the Constraints of Civil Society Organizations for Democratic Revival.

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Abstract

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, after twenty-six years, is characterized by increasing evidence of democratic recession evidenced by the gradual erosion of the core of democracy. This study argues that CSOs are structurally impeded from playing their corrective role in Nigeria because they are trapped in a vicious cycle of donor reliance, state manipulation, and the constriction of civic space. It explores how and why those constraints impede democratic development and revival, and what changes would be required for CSOs to regain their corrective functions. Drawing on key informant and in-depth semi-structured interviews with nineteen purposively selected civil society leaders, political office holders, and senior civil servants in Lagos and Abuja, the study finds that CSOs have shifted decisively from the confrontational activism that ended military rule to a collaborative, donor-financed advocacy model that state actors have learned to manage rather than fear. This change is understood in the light of competitive authoritarianism, a form of regime that preserves the precise institutional structure of democracy-elections, a nominally free press, a formally recognized civil society sector-but systematically undermines its actual substance of accountability. The study concludes that overcoming these constraints requires CSOs to pursue financial viability, disciplined internal reform, and deliberate subnational expansion - not as isolated organizational fixes, but as a coordinated strategy for reclaiming the civic space a competitive-authoritarian state has been permitted to narrow.

Keywords: Civil Society Organizations, Democratic Recession, Competitive Authoritarianism, Civic Space, Donor Dependency

Introduction

Since the commencement of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, civil society organizations have been accused of inactivity in mounting popular resistance to the country's governance ills. Despite these criticisms, CSOs have not gone into extinction; rather, they have been methodically confined. Perhaps, the pulse of their engagements has gone below the standard maintained under military rule. The state-civil society relation in Nigeria reached its climax in the 1990s, when the Campaign for Democracy, the National Democratic Coalition, and Allied Pro-democracy Movements absorbed the human cost - including the deaths of over 250 people on the streets of Lagos - forcing a military

government out of power in 1999 (Sowunmi, personal communication, 31 July 2025). This study asks whether, now that the 25th anniversary of Nigerian democracy has passed, civil society, as the institution established to address this disappointment, has lost the power to do so.

Diamond (2015) has called this phenomenon a 'democratic recession' which has been underway since the mid-2000s, not a collapse of democracy in the sense of an overthrow by coup, but a steadily worsening quality of democracy since that time, despite ongoing elections, the existence of oppositions, and the presence of formal freedoms on the statute books. Nigeria is following this trend as well. The Fourth Republic began with high hopes and expectations of a new era of governance marked by accountability, openness, and socio-economic advancement after many years of military dictatorship underlined by corruption, human rights violations, and economic mismanagement (Abdulrasheed, 2021; Akinyetun, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Allen, 2024). It is important to note that the return to democratic rule presented a new set of problems that include leadership failure, endemic corruption, human rights abuses, electoral fraud, unemployment, and pervasive poverty. As Omoyeni et al. (2025) have observed, Nigeria continues to grapple with difficulties including poverty, inequality, unemployment, corruption, instability, and inadequate infrastructure, despite an abundance of natural and human resources.

This is the interpretation of two separate monitoring regimes that are currently in operation and are not part of the country's domestic political discourse. In a country assessment released by the CIVICUS Monitor, Nigeria was rated as having 'Repressed' civic space (with a score of 36 out of 100), a classification it has held since it was first downgraded from 'Not Free' in 2019. It was again confirmed after the lethal crackdown on the #EndBadGovernance protests in October 2024, when dozens of protesters were killed, and journalists were arrested and prosecuted under an amended Cybercrimes Act (Akinyetun & Ebonine, 2023; CIVICUS Monitor, 2024, 2026). Nigeria's Freedom in the World 2025 also rates it as 'Partly Free' for endemic corruption in the petroleum sector, extrajudicial killings and torture by security and law enforcement agencies, and routine harassment and arrest of journalists reporting on corruption or human rights abuses (Freedom House, 2025). They are not partisan or activist definitions but rather the converging results of two separate, autonomous, and methodologically distinct monitoring authorities, and they validate the respondents' findings in this study as lived experience.

According to the V-Dem Institute, the overall democratic condition of the world's population has regressed to the level of democratic conditions in 1978, as ninety-two democracies have been surpassed by eighty-seven autocracies, while freedom of expression is the most common aspect of democracy targeted by autocratising rulers (Nord et al., 2026). Nigeria is in what is termed the 'grey zone' between the two categories of countries: electoral democracy and electoral autocracy, and its placement in

this category is explicitly qualified by measurement uncertainty (V-Dem Institute, 2025). These general categorizations show that Nigeria is not unique.

Given the foregoing, the role of civil society in enhancing good governance in Nigeria is becoming pivotal, considering the intractable economic problems confronting the country. According to Ikelegbe (2001), civil society provides the oil that lubricates the relationship between the government, business outfits, and the people; emerging democracies, especially in Africa, cannot be consolidated or sustained without a virile and vibrant civil society. This was corroborated by Diamond (1994) who argued that democratic consolidation is unattainable wherever associational life is too weak, or too dependent, to hold elected officials to account. This submission is relevant in the Nigerian context and part of the focus of the present study. The same governance pathologies that are supposed to be addressed by these institutions, this study argues, are the ones that make them unable to function as a corrective force: an 'iron triangle' of constraint, as existing literature on civil society in Nigeria has identified in its various elements: funding pressures, state repression, and internal fragmentation. This study focuses on a more specific problem with direct theoretical and policy implications.

The main questions posed by this study are: What is necessary to take Nigeria beyond the constraints facing civil society organizations to revive democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? How/why do the constraints facing civil society organizations hinder the democratic process? How and why CSOs engagement with the Nigerian state shifted from the anti-military struggle of the 1990s to the Fourth Republic? What are the financial, legal, coercive, and organizational mechanisms that limit the capacity of CSOs? Are they merely organizational shortcomings or state instruments of strategic nature?

The study is divided into the following sections. Section 1 dwells on the introduction. Section 2 contextualizes the argument within the literature on civil society and democratization in Africa. Section 3 advances the competitive authoritarianism approach to third-sector accounts over functionalist perspectives. The methodology of the study is presented in Section 4. The results for the constraints and remediation are presented and discussed in Section 5. The study concludes with recommendations and policy implications.

Literature Review

Over the past 30 years, the literature on civil society in Nigeria has come to agree that the organizations that won their struggle for democracy and an end to military rule have not been very effective in reproducing that feat under civilian rule. Amao and Omilusi (2019), in a study of civil society across post-colonial Africa, reported the loss of collective unity after the death of the common enemy, the military regime. Carothers (2002) similarly found that opposition movements that initially fought authoritarian regimes tend to

disintegrate and become ineffective in democratic contexts. Smidt (2018) warned that civil society groups in post-transition African countries often surrender their autonomy through co-optation and involvement with incumbent governments - a pattern this article's findings will show has been realized almost verbatim in Nigeria. Buyse (2018) further enhances the analytical value of this observation by breaking down civic-space closure into incentives for accreditation, funding, and appointment, as opposed to the disincentives of administrative obstruction, defamation, and criminalization, which this study extends in its framing of Nigerian evidence.

Adedibu et al. (2025) documented that CSO strategies shifted toward advocacy and election monitoring after 1999, in contrast to the confrontational approach that characterized the anti-military struggle. This transformation from militant activism to collaborative engagement is not, on its own, evidence of decline - Folayan (personal communication, 26 November 2024) and Olorunmola (personal communication, 26 November 2024) both frame it as a rational adaptation to a changed political opportunity structure. While the literature has been slow to address the point at which adaptive collaboration crosses into co-optation, this article delves into it.

Concerning funding, Mallya (2009), Mercer and Green (2013), and Chahim and Prakash (2014) have each demonstrated that donor funding exerts a gravitational pull-on organizational agenda, drawing CSOs away from grassroots mobilization and toward the professionalized advocacy activities that donor reporting requirements reward. Chukwudi and Ojo (2023) extend this into Nigeria specifically, showing that dependence on external donors results in mission creep as organizations align their activities with donor preferences rather than local needs, while Williamson and Rodd (2016) show that donor funding can reorient Nigerian CSOs toward service delivery at the expense of advocacy. On repression, Bemgba et al. (2025) documented the mechanics of co-optation and state harassment of Nigerian civil society, and Amnesty International (2022) has separately catalogued arbitrary arrests, harassment of activists, and the violent dispersal of protests by Nigerian security agents.

Levitsky and Way's (2010) notion of competitive authoritarianism provides the most obvious link between these results. A competitive authoritarian regime has genuinely competitive elections and a nominally free civil society and civic life. However, it also systematically discourages opposition and civil society through a mix of selective law enforcement, resource concentration, and intermittent but duly calculated repression, which is enough to quell opposition without spawning the international costs of overt authoritarianism. Nigeria's electoral history since 1999 would be a textbook case of the hybrid type. However, it has seldom been systematically characterized, except by Esamagu and Tele (2020), who postulate such a classification without elaborating. This study uses this to test and extend it for the CSO experience, and it is an appropriate extension because: the current competitive authoritarianism is not as much about

breaking as about creeping, legalistic, and incremental, (Levitsky and Way, 2020). Using comparative data, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) demonstrate that the preferred tool for democratic erosion in the present day is the same as for the state: legal, fiscal, and bureaucratic instruments. Both propositions capture the environment of civic space in Nigeria in an uneasy way, without having been subjected to a critical examination by those who form it.

While extant literature has highlighted CSOs' engagement with governance in the Fourth Republic in the areas of electoral reforms, constitutional amendments, police brutality, and election monitoring (Amao & Omilusi, 2019; Esamagu & Tele, 2020; Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023), there remains a dearth of academic research on the substance of CSO engagement juxtaposed against their activities under military rule, and, more specifically, on the interlocking mechanisms - financial, legal, and organizational - through which that engagement has been constrained. This study addresses that gap directly.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Levitsky and Way's (2010) theory of competitive authoritarianism, engaged alongside the liberal theory of civil society as a normative counterpoint. Competitive authoritarianism describes regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are the principal means of gaining power. However, incumbents abuse the state to disadvantage their opponents so severely that the playing field is not level - a condition the theory's authors distinguish from both consolidated democracy and closed authoritarianism precisely because the abuse is selective, deniable, and calibrated to avoid the reputational costs of overt repression.

Applied to the Nigerian case, the theory's structural weaknesses in Third Sector Theory (TST) - namely its focus on formal, registered organizational categories at the expense of the overtly political dynamics civil society actually confronts (Viterna et al., 2015) - become the theory's very subject matter rather than its blind spot. As Levitsky and Way (2010) show, selective repression and legal harassment of Nigerian CSOs are not exceptions to a formally democratic political system, but rather a defining feature of a governance model that mimics democracy's procedural form while systematically undermining its substantive content. TST's focus on service provision and formal autonomy has limited analytical purchase for articulating these overtly political dynamics, precisely because the theory was built to explain why voluntary organizations exist, not how a competitive-authoritarian state manages them once they do (Esamagu & Tele, 2020).

In contrast, liberal theory directly addresses the normative stakes of civic-space erosion. For liberalism, the narrowing of civic space violates the core values without which civil society cannot function: freedom of speech, assembly, and association (Bignami, 2007;

Osborne, 2010). Moravcsik's (1992) claim that state legitimacy should rest on citizens' pluralistic preferences rather than coercion is directly challenged by the competitive authoritarianism this article documents. The two usefully partition the use of labor: competitive authoritarianism provides the vocabulary for describing how the Nigerian state treats civil society, ranging from co-optation to harassment to selective settlement, while liberal theory provides the normative yardstick for assessing state-civil society relations as a democratic deficit rather than merely an administrative fact.

This dualism also provides the grounding for the article's main proposition: CSO constraint is not just a secondary product of a non-functioning democracy in Nigeria but an embedded characteristic of an equilibrium of competition and toleration of the presence of civil society, in which the state has learned to abate the CSO's capacity to hold it accountable. If this is to be tested, the first step is to define the constraints and empirically assess how CSO actors perceive them.

3.1 Operational Fit: From Theoretical Concepts to Empirical Indicators

Given that there are three perspectives, their relationships with each other must be stated explicitly and not implied. They do not compete with each other for the same answer to the same question but are used together in a complementary manner to answer different sets of questions. The study's explanatory framework is competitive authoritarianism, which provides a causal understanding of why a formally democratic state tolerates an organized civil society while systematically undermining its corrective power. Third Sector Theory is used descriptively and in part as a foil to provide some words for the organizational and resourcing characteristics of the CSO field - registration, funding base, sustainability, and succession - and the place of its explanatory power fails where a political explanation is needed. Normative use of liberal theory: provides a benchmark for judging the outcome of a democratic deficit, not just an administrative reality. The three are not just contrasted with each other but are ordered in terms of functions, and only the first has its claim assessed against the evidence presented here.

Four propositions emerged from the study of competitive authoritarianism and were carried over into the analysis: (1) the uneven playing field, where incumbents use state institutions to harm challengers while preserving a legitimate façade of democracy; (2) the tripartite incumbent repertoire of selective incorporation, deniable legal harassment, and material inducement; (3) low-intensity, calibrated repression, designed to avoid the reputational cost of overt authoritarianism; and (4) the structural divergence between procedural form and substantive accountability (Levitsky & Way, 2010, 2020). The analysis draws on the government failure premise of voluntary organizations, as well as resource dependency and institutional sustainability issues from Third Sector Theory (Viterna et al., 2015). It carries the constitutional nature of the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, and Moravcsik's (1992) argument that only the accumulation

of pluralistic preferences of society can provide legitimate authority, not coercion (Bignami, 2007; Osborne, 2010).

These propositions were not used abstractly. All were translated into observable indicators in the Fourth Republic in Nigeria before the interview corpus was re-interrogated. Thus, the theoretical interpretation of any constraint is based on a stated rule and not on ease of interpretation. The rule is that a constraint is read as competitive authoritarianism if it is due to the purposeful behavior of the state, which treats compliant and non-compliant organizations differently but does not take away the formal legal position of civil society. It is read as a third sector if it is a constraint in the organizational field itself and would remain if there was no state action. Constraints that meet both conditions are reported as such; in particular, donor dependency is an example of a double constraint. The rule also resolves what would have been regarded as disconfirming evidence: if the problems respondents faced had been entirely attributed to their own capacity problems, and there had been no consistent account of how they came about in a state, then the central thesis of the article, namely that the rule is sustained by selective and purposive state conduct, would not have been satisfied. The resulting correspondence between the concept, indicators, and analytical functions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Operationalization of the Theoretical Framework in the Nigerian Case*

Perspective	**Concept or proposition applied**	**Observable indicator in Nigeria's Fourth Republic**	**Analytical function in this study**
Competitive authoritarianism	Uneven playing field	Selective enforcement of the amended Cybercrimes Act and public-order powers against critical CSOs and journalists	Explains how formal civic freedoms coexist with practical constraint
Competitive authoritarianism	Selective incorporation	Appointment of CSO principals to boards, commissions and advisory bodies	Establishes co-optation as strategy rather than individual career drift
Competitive authoritarianism	Material inducement	Contract "settlement" and discretionary patronage directed at activists	Explains demobilization achieved without

Perspective	Concept or proposition applied	Observable indicator in Nigeria's Fourth Republic	Analytical function in this study
			visible coercion
Competitive authoritarianism	Calibrated, deniable repression	Arrest and pre-trial detention on treason or cybercrime allegations; policing of protest	Explains the reputational economy that keeps repression intermittent
Third Sector Theory	Government-failure rationale; resource dependence	Reliance on short-cycle foreign project grants; thin domestic philanthropic base	Describes the resourcing structure that co-optation exploits
Third Sector Theory	Institutional sustainability	Absence of succession planning; thematic duplication among organizations	Describes organizational vulnerability arising independently of state conduct
Liberal theory	Constitutive associational freedoms	CIVICUS 'Repressed' rating; Freedom House 'Partly Free' classification	Supplies the normative benchmark against which the deficit is assessed
Liberal theory	Legitimacy through pluralistic preference aggregation	Narrowing of the channels through which organized preferences reach the state	Frames constraint as a democratic rather than an administrative problem

Source: Authors' construction from Levitsky and Way (2010, 2020), Viterna et al. (2015), Moravcsik (1992), and the study's interview data.

The above analysis also applies to the prescriptive argument of the study. If constraints were mainly a third-sector issue, solutions would lie in organizational strategies and practices, such as more effective fundraising, more robust boards, and professional management. There are also organizational remedies that are still required but are no longer sufficient if the phenomenon is mainly competitive authoritarian. The chances of democratic awakening, however, lie less in the capacity of CSOs than in the political stakes involved in co-opting, settling, and selectively prosecuting them by the state.

Liberal theory defines the cost and what it has to cover - the freedom of association without which accountability would be impossible. Third Sector Theory identifies the levers, primarily financing and succession, on which it is possible to reduce the exposure surface available to the state.

Methodology

The choice of key informants and in-depth semi-structured interviews was informed by the research question. The question is how and why constraint's function, and in particular, whether they are incidental or strategic. This is best answered from what is left behind from the mechanisms that produce them. The context of this study requires key informant selection because a respondent is in the position within the process under investigation (Tansey, 2007; Mosley, 2013). The instrument was semi-structured as the analysis required respondents to produce the correspondence between testimony and theory. Documentary and media sources were adopted as triangulating sources.

The study population comprised selected stakeholders of CSOs and government officials (past and present), selected for their demonstrable engagement with the national question of governance in Nigeria. The study adopted purposive and snowball sampling. Ten CSOs were purposively identified based on their direct bearing on the study's focus: the Campaign for Democracy, the Social Democratic Movement, the Nigerian Bar Association, the Centre for Constitutionalism and Demilitarization, the Academic Staff Union of Universities, the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, the Civil Liberties Organisation, the Transition Monitoring Group, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, and Yiaga Africa. Snowball sampling subsequently expanded the sample to 19 respondents in total: 12 civil society activists, 4 political office holders (past and present), and 3 senior civil servants.

Three inclusion criteria were used to select respondents. The respondents had to have held a position in which decision-making or coordinating was part of the official duties of the organization at the time of the events discussed, be able to speak to at least one full electoral cycle of the Fourth Republic, and have held a position in which interaction with civil society was part of the official assignment. The composition of the samples is summarized in Table 2.

The research instrument was an interview guide containing semi-structured questions. The data collected were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to analyze textual content and identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conducted from November 2024 to October 2025. They were held wherever possible, face-to-face in Lagos and Abuja, and by telephone or electronic correspondence when a face-to-face meeting was not possible. Every interview began by explaining the

goals and scope of the study, that all interviews would be recorded, and that the participant could discontinue participation at any time and that the participant would be quoted as a participant in the study.

The analysis was carried out in two phases. The first was inductive and data-led, and followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2021; Patton 2002) involving familiarization with the transcripts, generation of initial codes across all the transcripts, collation of codes into candidate themes, review of themes with coded extracts, definition and naming themes, and selection of representative extracts. The second phase was deductive and involved the categorization of each of the themes identified.

Trustworthiness was ensured using the four conventional standards of qualitative enquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was based on the triangulation of the three categories of respondents and comparing the evidence found in the interviews with the independent civic evaluations in the literature. Confirmability is supported by the practice of presenting the formulation of the respondents in their own words, whereby they sometimes formulate something that contradicts the argument of this study. Respondents were recruited voluntarily and informed of their participation, and no respondent was named without their explicit agreement.

It is worth stating that, of the 30 participants identified, 19 were eventually interviewed. Snowball referral and remote (phone and email) follow-up were adopted. Although the sample had rich knowledge of the subject matter, it was not statistically representative of Nigeria's civil society sector. Thus, the findings presented in the study were interpreted as insights from key informants in Nigeria, rather than a population-level survey of CSOs' experiences in Nigeria. This constitutes a limitation to the study.

Table 2: *Composition of the Interview Sample and Basis of Inclusion*

Participant category	**N**	**Basis of inclusion**	**Principal contribution to the analysis**
Civil society leaders and activists	12	Decision-making or coordinating role in one of the ten purposively sampled CSOs; active across at least one electoral cycle	Change in strategy since 1999; lived experience of funding, harassment and co-optation
Political office holders (serving and former)	4	Official remit involving direct engagement with civil society organizations	State-side account of partnership, appointment and patronage

Participant category	N	Basis of inclusion	Principal contribution to the analysis
Senior civil servants	3	Administrative responsibility for programmes or processes engaging CSOs	Institutional and regulatory dimension of civic-space management
Total interviewed	19	Thirty participants identified at design stage; eleven not reached (see Section 4.4)	Triangulated account of constraint across state and non-state vantage points

Note. Attribution in the analysis follows the consent granted by each respondent; respondents who declined attribution are identified by role alone.

Results and Discussion

From Militant Activism to Managed Collaboration

This section addresses how and why the character of CSO engagement with the Nigerian state changed between the anti-military struggle of the 1990s and the Fourth Republic.

The first and most consequential finding is that CSOs have fundamentally changed the nature of their operations following the return to civilian rule. As Sola Folayan of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy put it:

Civil society activism was reduced post-transition to democracy in Nigeria, principally because the main focus before transition was to send the military to the barracks. Therefore, their strategies changed to election monitoring, voter education, electoral reforms, and the provision of support systems to either the government in power or opposition political parties with the view to consolidating democracy in Nigeria (S. Folayan, personal communication, 26 November 2024).

A more critical assessment came from Taiwo Hassan, National Coordinator of the Education Rights Campaign of the Democratic Socialist Movement, who pointed to fragmentation in the ranks of CSOs following the attainment of democracy: “some activists entered active politics by joining political parties, dividing civil society into those who supported democracy from outside government and those who became entangled with it from within” (T. Hassan, personal communication, 27 March 2025). Osa Director offered the most direct evaluation of this trajectory: “I will admit that CSOs were vibrant during the military era in Nigeria... However, I must admit that I am not too impressed with the oversight responsibility carried out by CSOs since the dawn of civilian rule, especially in the last ten years; they have become docile and quiet. Some have also become partisan and compromised” (O. Director, personal communication, 16 October 2025). This shift from confrontation to collaboration, and from collaboration to

compromise, in many important instances, is the empirical pivot on which this article's core argument turns. There is no need for a competitive authoritarian state to outright ban civil society; it is just enough to make it more viable to work together than to fight against and sit tight. The interview information indicates that this is exactly what happened with Nigeria's youth over the last 26 years.

The Architecture of Constraint

This section identifies the specific mechanisms through which CSO capacity is constrained and whether each is an incidental organizational weakness or an instrument of state strategy.

The three constraints that emerged from the data with strong internal coherence were deemed worthy of interpretation as a structure rather than simply a list: dependence on funding, state-orchestrated co-optation/repression, and organizational fragmentation. Table 3 presents each constraint by its main mechanism, predominant evidentiary basis in the interview data, and the theory it substantiates: third-sector or competitive authoritarian.

Table 3: Structural Constraints on CSO Effectiveness in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Constraint	**Principal mechanism**	**Representative evidence**	**Theoretical reading**
Funding dependency	Overreliance on foreign donor grants; absence of a domestic philanthropic base	"In most cases, CSOs depend on foreign donors for finance, and this undermines their independence" (Folayan, 2024)	TST government-failure logic strained by donor-agenda capture
State co-optation	Appointment of CSO leaders into government; contract "settlement"; harassment	"Government appoints members of CSOs to be part of the government, thereby weakening their spirit of activism" (Banjoko, 2024)	Competitive authoritarianism: selective incorporation
Civic-space repression	Arbitrary arrest, detention,	"Engaging in activism in Nigerian	Competitive authoritarianism:

	criminalization of dissent under cybercrime and terrorism statutes	democracy today is like a criminal activity before the government" (Hassan, 2025)	selective repression
Organizational fragmentation	Proliferation of thematically overlapping CSOs; absence of succession planning	"The vibrancy of likes of CLO, NADECO... has dwindled today because there were no succession plans" (Banjoko, 2024)	TST institutional-sustainability deficit

Note. Constraint categories were derived inductively from thematic analysis of key informant and in-depth interviews. Quotations are abbreviated from the full transcript excerpts

Source: Authors' analysis of primary interview data collected for the study, supplemented by the theoretical readings.

On funding, Babatunde Akin of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights captured the issue in a single phrase: "Sustainability, i.e., funding, lack of focus, overdependence on funding partners, shrinking civic space by the government, lack of professionalism..." (A. Babatunde, personal communication, 25 March 2025). Johnson Avoseh, a local government chairman, went further, framing external funding itself as a vulnerability: "External influence is also a bane to the genuine intention of CSOs in Nigeria. The external forces that are not favourably disposed to a particular administration may use CSOs as a tool of destabilization" (J. Avoseh, personal communication, 11 June 2025). On co-optation, Abiodun Banjoko of the Impact Development Initiative offered the most systematic account, describing a tripartite state strategy: "(i) Cooptation: Government appoints members of CSOs to be part of the government, thereby weakening their spirit of activism; (ii) Harassment: Government does this by suppressing the voices of CSOs members (arrest, torture, detain etc.); and (iii) Settlement: Political class gives contracts to some CSOs activists with the view to silencing them" (A. Banjoko, personal communication, 26 November 2024). Lanre Arogundade of the International Press Centre provided a concrete illustration of the harassment prong: "Government in Nigeria is becoming increasingly intolerant of opposing or critical views... The state had captured the judiciary, and once they want to deal with you, they grab you and then say you have committed treason or cyberbullying,

and without being subjected to trial, you will be thrown into detention for months" (L. Arogundade, personal communication, 4 December 2024).

The three stages of co-opting, harassment, and settlement described by Banjoko are very much in line with Levitsky and Way's (2010) account of the tools a competitive authoritarian incumbent can use: selective incorporation of the best opposition leaders, deniable legal harassment, and material inducement (as opposed to outright suppression). The fact that a civil society practitioner spontaneously (without prompting from the theoretical literature) articulated a taxonomy that is so close to the theoretical literature is a form of corroboration. This mechanism is not academically inferred but is legible to people who live with it every day. Concerning fragmentation, Abiodun Banjoko observed that CSOs are often "engaged in unwarranted recognition in a thematic area of work" - competition for donor visibility within the same issue space, which Louis Anita summarized through proverb: "If you want to go far, go alone, but if you want to go fast, go with others" (L. Anita, personal communication, 27 November 2024). Abiodun Sowunmi added that this fragmentation is not merely accidental but is actively exploited by the state, which "deliberately sponsors anti-civil society protests to discredit genuine CSOs' actions in the country" (A. Sowunmi, personal communication, 31 July 2025) - a further instance of the state converting an organizational weakness into a governance tool, consistent with the competitive-authoritarian pattern this article traces.

Pathways to Democratic Resurrection

This section addresses which reforms would plausibly mitigate the constraints identified above, and under what conditions they would avoid reproducing the dependency they are intended to remedy.

Respondents were equally forthcoming on remediation. Babatunde Akin proposed a multi-pronged funding strategy: "Civil society should develop sustainability plans to raise funds for their operations... Nigerian government should initiate civil society support funds (CSSF) for civil societies in Nigeria" (A. Babatunde, personal communication, 25 April 2025). Adewale Aderemi and Osa Director both pointed toward predictable, diversified domestic resourcing - membership contributions, domestic philanthropy, and social-enterprise models - as the route away from donor capture, while cautioning that resource volume alone is insufficient without long-term predictability (A. Aderemi, personal communication, 28 November 2024; O. Director, personal communication, 16 October 2025).

On the state relationship, Babatunde proposed a fundamental reframing: "Government should see civil societies as partners in progress" (A. Babatunde, personal communication, 25 March 2025) - though Aderemi cautioned against collapsing the distinction between partnership and capture: "CSOs should see themselves as partners in

progress with the government and not necessarily as a bedmate" (A. Aderemi, personal communication, 28 November 2024). On internal reform, Banjoko urged CSOs to move "out of their comfort zones" toward direct grassroots mobilization rather than office-bound advocacy (A. Banjoko, personal communication, 26 November 2024), while Akanni Tunde and Banjoko separately identified the absence of succession planning as the specific mechanism behind the decline of historically significant organizations such as the Civil Liberties Organisation and NADECO (T. Akanni, personal communication, 16 April 2025).

These recommendations are proactive legislative, internal-democracy, and financial diversification counter-measures, since they directly neutralize the vulnerability to donor capture, fragmentation of the state the donor exploits, and exposure surface on which the donor conducts selective repression. This correspondence is depicted in Table 4, illustrating the remediation pathway for each constraint and the theoretical reasoning underlying the pathway.

Table 4: Constraint-Remediation Correspondence in CSO Democratic Resurrection

Constraint	Remediation Pathway
Donor dependency	Financial diversification: membership dues, domestic philanthropy, social enterprise, state CSSF
Co-optation/repression	Internal-democracy safeguards; disciplined engagement protocols; legal-defense pooling
Fragmentation/succession failure	Mandatory succession planning; thematic-cluster coordination to reduce donor-driven duplication

Source: Authors' synthesis of primary interview data.

None of these pathways is self-executing. The greatest danger of financial diversification is that a Nigerian government civil society support fund (as opposed to a donor support fund) would be another form of state capture if it is not statutorily protected from executive discretion, which would be more direct than donor capture. The literature on hybrid financing models globally (outside the Global South) (Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023) indicates that diversification will only help lower capture risk if there are many funding sources, including the government, none of which can dictate the organization without the others. This qualification is not meant to invalidate the remediation rationale presented here, but rather to set the circumstances under which it is valid.

Situating the Findings within Comparative and Theoretical Literature

This study's findings on the loss of collective unity after the removal of the common military adversary corroborate Amao and Omilusi's (2019) account of civil society across post-colonial Africa. Its findings on donor-driven mission drift align closely with Mallya (2009), Mercer and Green (2013), and Chahim and Prakash (2014). Where this study extends the literature is in demonstrating, through direct testimony, the deliberateness with which Nigerian state actors have exploited these organizational vulnerabilities - a dimension the third-sector literature, with its structuralist focus on formal organizational features, has been ill-equipped to capture (Esamagu & Tele, 2020; Viterna et al., 2015). Theories have value because they can explain the significance of the finding that CSOs' legislative successes - the Freedom of Information Act (2011), the Not-Too-Young-To-Run Act, and the Child Rights Act - have not been mirrored by a corresponding increase in the tolerance of civic dissent in the state. It reinforces Diamond's (1994) warning that procedural change does not necessarily mean democratic consolidation and formal gains are not necessarily a bad sign for a competitive-authoritarian state because they may come with little or no cost in practice as long as the civic space in which they can be enforced against it remains 'Repressed.' This is the main characteristic of this case study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined what constrains Nigerian civil society organizations from acting as agents of democratic resurrection, and what a credible path past those constraints would look like. The evidence points to a structure of constraint - donor dependency, state co-optation and repression, and organizational fragmentation - that is neither incidental nor merely the sum of separate organizational weaknesses, but a mutually reinforcing equilibrium consistent with, and best explained by, a competitive-authoritarian reading of Nigeria's post-1999 political order. CSOs have not gone away, and their legacy of past accomplishments - the Freedom of Information Act and continuous election monitoring - is not lost. During the same period, however, the state has also developed the means, indeed the watchfulness, to control, or at least regulate, rather than to terrorize, an increasingly professionalized and donor-financed civil society sector, as the CIVICUS Monitor's 'Repressed' rating and Freedom House's 'Partly Free' classification both confirm. One thing is obvious from this study, and as democracy is a mode of governance meant to promote freedom, it is imperative that Nigerian citizens play an active role in the process for it to achieve its original purpose. Rather than restoring a romanticized militancy that a competitive-authoritarian democracy would have beaten out of the people anyway, rejuvenating CSO activism requires three structural counter-measures identified in this article: diversified and insulated financing, disciplined internal governance, and a coordinated, not fragmented, civic-space strategy.

The change in the character of CSO engagement from confrontation to collaboration stemmed from the associated change in the political opportunity structure; when one visible opponent was removed, the coalition that opposed him was dispersed, and when

he was replaced by the advocacy model that was professionalized and donor-funded, he was a rational adaptation that proved manageable where street mobilization was not. Financial, legal-coercive, and organizational are the mechanisms of constraint to the second, selective prosecution and co-optation are explicitly state strategic, and fragmentation and succession failure are organizational properties that the state has learned to use, not build. The reforms that might break these constraints - a more insulated, diversified financing mechanism, the enforcement of succession and internal-democracy requirements, and the coordination of the occupation of civic space rather than its fragmentation - have all been commonplace before and are collectively inadequate unless they change the cost calculus of the state, or else a support fund placed under the discretion of the executive would be no remedy but would simply replace one dependency with another. The situation is not one of civic failure but of a position of civil society that a competitive-authoritarian state has deliberately created, which CSOs have to overcome by increasing the political costs of its management, rather than lowering the political costs of managing itself.

The implication for Nigerian policy makers is that the health of civil society cannot be determined by the number of registered organizations or legislative victories won as a result of their advocacy; it can be measured by civic space in which those organizations function, and independent monitors rate Nigeria's civic space as 'Repressed.' The depoliticization of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission's powers to address state harassment of activists, and the shrinking of the Cybercrimes Act provisions used to harass protesters and journalists, should be mainstreamed in any national governance reform agenda, even one that the state itself advances.

The results warn those who provide funds or development assistance to the international community and encourage donors to avoid funding structures that inadvertently contribute to the very dependency this article highlights as a structural vulnerability. The mission creep risk noted by Chukwudi and Ojo (2023) would be reduced if mission funding is provided in a multi-year, unrestricted, and pooled manner rather than as short-cycle, project-specific grants linked to donor priorities. The policy recommendation is meant for the organizations themselves, not for the government: Civil society has the capacity to implement succession planning, internal democracy audits, and coordinated thematic clustering, and can do so without the government's involvement. With the state proven to take advantage of fragmentation, these are not pleasant attributes of good governance, but conditions for its ongoing viability as a vehicle for democratic revival.

The study recommends the following:

1. CSOs should uphold internal democracy in leadership recruitment, positioning themselves to hold the political class accountable rather than replicate its patronage logic internally.

2. CSOs should pursue diversified, predictable domestic financing - membership contributions, domestic philanthropy, and social-enterprise models - before, and as a precondition for, engaging any government-administered support fund, to avoid substituting state capture for donor capture.

3. CSOs should establish binding succession-planning requirements as a condition of coalition membership and donor eligibility, converting a currently voluntary best practice into an enforceable institutional norm.

4. CSOs should pursue proactive, early-stage engagement with the legislative process rather than reactive protest, reducing the exposure surface on which selective state repression currently operates.

5. Nigerian legislators should consider statutory protections - modeled on comparable civic-space legislation elsewhere in the region - that explicitly criminalize the settlement and co-optation tactics respondents describe, converting an informal norm of tolerance for such practices into an enforceable legal constraint on executive conduct.

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