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Privatised Statehood and the Paradox of Counterterrorism in Nigeria: A Political Economy Perspective

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Abstract

How does the privatisation of the Nigerian State undermine its capacity to combat terrorism? This paper is developed to answer this question. Using the political economy perspective, it interrogates the paradoxical relationship between state privatisation and counterterrorism effectiveness in Nigeria. Anchored in literature that critiques the Nigerian State's failure to achieve autonomy from elite capture, the analysis identifies privatisation as manifesting through ethnicised political domination, patronage-based governance, systemic corruption, and the militarisation of electoral politics. These dynamics have commodified violence, entrenched inter-ethnic rivalries, and subordinated the public good to narrow elite interests. The resultant governance vacuum and socioeconomic marginalisation create structural conditions conducive to terrorism, while simultaneously weakening institutional mechanisms for counterterrorism. The paper argues that counterterrorism strategies in Nigeria will remain compromised as long as the State is privatised. It concludes by advocating for comprehensive state reform aimed at restoring public accountability and reorienting the State toward the pursuit of collective security.

Keywords: Privatised Statehood, Counterterrorism, Political Economy, Elite Capture, State Reform, Nigeria

Introduction

This paper examines how the privatisation of the Nigerian State, defined as the capture and deployment of public institutions for private, sectional, or ethnic interests, undermines practical counterterrorism efforts (George & Adelaja, 2022; Nwozor et al., 2023). Building on theories of state autonomy and elite capture (Skocpol, 1985; Bayart, 1993), the analysis situates Nigeria's weakened state capacity within broader processes of elite domination and ethnic politicisation. The Nigerian State's loss of autonomy has led to a political system in which the public good is subordinated to the imperatives of ethnic, sectional, and elite interests (Ikelegbe, 2020; Mustapha, 2023). Consequently, state resources are disproportionately diverted to serve private political goals, while national security priorities are downplayed or ethnicised.

This privatisation of governance exacerbates elite fragmentation and ethnic competition, producing a fractured state apparatus incapable of developing a coherent and inclusive security strategy. The mobilisation of ethnic sentiments for political

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competition has undermined national unity and encouraged perceptions of government action through ethnic lenses, even in matters of national security (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011; Iwuoha, 2022). This situation fosters distrust between ethnic groups and between citizens and the State, which terrorists can exploit.

Moreover, the entrenchment of electoral violence, political militarisation, and the commodification of violence has contributed to an informal arms economy that fuels insecurity. For instance, the surge in arms importation and seizures in the lead-up to the 2015 general elections signalled the growing entanglement between political processes and the proliferation of weapons, a trend that weakens state control over violence and compromises counterterrorism operations (Ugwueze & Onuoha, 2021; Adebayo & Ogunnubi, 2022).

At the socioeconomic level, corruption, arguably the most visible manifestation of state privatisation, creates structural inequalities and grievances that breed radicalisation. Poverty, especially when it coexists with ostentatious wealth among the elite, fosters alienation, resentment, and a breakdown in civic trust (UNDP, 2023; Aliyu et al., 2022). This alienation makes impoverished populations more vulnerable to recruitment by violent non-state actors.

These dynamics culminate in a fundamental paradox: the same political elites who are positioned to reform the system are often its greatest beneficiaries and therefore reluctant to dismantle its structural foundations (Campbell & Page, 2023). Their failure to implement cost-reducing reforms or equitable redistribution further entrenches insecurity. In contrast, civil society organisations (CSOs), despite facing credibility and capacity challenges, emerge as potential agents for mobilising democratic reform and reorienting the State toward the public good (Okoye, 2023).

By and large, this paper argues that Nigeria's counterterrorism challenges cannot be resolved solely through tactical military responses. Instead, they require a structural transformation of the Nigerian State to reverse elite capture and restore its autonomy. Without such reforms, efforts to counter terrorism will continue to be undermined by the very architecture of the State tasked with protecting national security.

The paper employs a qualitative research design, based on the thematic approach.The analysis draws on multiple sources of secondary qualitative data, including: Government documents and policy statements (e.g., Nigeria's National Security Strategy, Terrorism (Prevention) Act 2011, and budgetary allocations to security agencies); Reports by international organisations (e.g., UNDP, Transparency International, Global Terrorism Index, scholarly literature and peer-reviewed journal articles on Nigerian governance, terrorism, and political economy. It also utilized credible media reports and investigative journalism on arms procurement, electoral violence, and security lapses.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a political economy framework to examine the structural roots of terrorism in Nigeria and to explain how the privatisation of the State undermines

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effective counterterrorism. Political economy is traced back to classical thinkers such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and David Ricardo, who examined the relationship between politics, economics, and society. At its core, political economy examines how power and resources are distributed and contested within and between states, markets, and institutions. Smith (1776) in *The Wealth of Nations* emphasised the role of markets and the invisible hand in promoting economic welfare, while Marx (1867) in *Capital* highlighted how capitalist production leads to exploitation and class conflict.

Over time, political economy has evolved to incorporate institutional, feminist, environmental, and global political economy perspectives, which examine how economic policies are influenced by political structures, ideologies, and global inequalities (Gilpin, 2001; Mosco, 2009). Contemporary political economy investigates both formal and informal rules governing economic behaviour, revealing the embeddedness of economic outcomes in political decisions, social relations, and historical contexts (North, 1990; Chang, 2002).

The political economy approach views the State as both an arena and an instrument of competing interests, particularly within the context of capitalist accumulation, elite domination, and institutional capture (Ake, 1981). In this context, it illustrates how the interaction between political and economic interests influences institutions and governance outcomes, including the State's capacity to maintain internal security and stability. In relation to this study, it explains how state capture by the Nigerian political elite for personal aggrandisement has undermined the State's capacity to counter terrorism.

The political economy framework thus helps to re-frame terrorism not as an isolated criminal phenomenon, but as a symptom of more profound structural distortions in the Nigerian polity The framework supports the paper's central argument: that no amount of military response or technical intervention will succeed unless the Nigerian State undergoes structural transformation to restore effective governance.

Understanding Terrorism: Conceptual Framework

Terrorism remains a highly contested and evolving concept, shaped by a range of academic, legal, and institutional interpretations. In general terms, it is understood as the deliberate use of violence by non-state actors to advance political, ideological, or religious aims, typically through the targeting of civilians to instil fear and pressure governments or societies into action or change (Sinai, 2008; Schmid, 2004; Weinberg et al., 2004; George & Adelaja, 2022). It functions both as a tactic and a political strategy, often obscuring the boundary between criminality and asymmetrical warfare (Blum, 2003; Cooper, 2011; Campbell & Page, 2023).

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The scholarly consensus identifies several defining features: the calculated use of violence, the targeting of non-combatants, the pursuit of political or ideological objectives, and an intention to provoke widespread fear (Schmid & Jongman, 1988; Moghadam, 2006; Wang et al., 2024). Forrest (2012) identifies five principal political aims commonly linked to terrorism: the overthrow of regimes, the seizure of territorial control, the pursuit of policy reforms, the imposition of social order, and the defence of the status quo by reactionary forces. This political framing positions terrorism as a response to structural violence and the breakdown of the relationship between the State and society (Bukarti, 2023).

International and regional legal frameworks provide broad definitions of terrorism, but these often risk equating all forms of violence with terrorism. Examples include the United Nations Draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (2004), the African Union's 1999 Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, and Nigeria's Terrorism (Prevention) Act of 2011, amended in 2013. These instruments typically define terrorism as intentional violence against persons or property intended to intimidate governments or the public. However, they often fail to clearly distinguish between state-perpetrated violence and that by non-state actors, or between ordinary criminality and ideologically motivated violence (Zalman, 2015; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Iwuoha, 2022). For the sake of analytical clarity, this paper adopts the definition put forward by the Council on Foreign Relations (cited in Ogundiya & Amzat, 2008), which emphasises that terrorism is predominantly carried out by sub-national or non-state actors seeking political ends.

Terrorism does not emerge in isolation; identifiable structural, political, and socioeconomic conditions influence it. Forrest's (2012) framework, which is particularly applicable to the Nigerian context, identifies four key preconditions for terrorism: disaffection with the prevailing system, where violence is viewed as the only path to meaningful change; horizontal inequalities, where disparities in power and resource distribution between identity-based groups foster polarised "us versus them" sentiments; endemic corruption, whereby political elites monopolise state resources, thereby eroding state legitimacy and public trust; and the widespread availability of arms in environments where state authority and legal oversight are weak, enabling armed rebellion (Aliyu et al., 2022; Mustapha, 2023).

These conditions are worsened in contexts where elite capture and the privatisation of state institutions dominate, as is the case in Nigeria. Scholars such as Ake (2001), Osaghae (2007), and Rotberg (2009) have long warned that when governance institutions are manipulated for narrow interests, state legitimacy deteriorates and service delivery collapses, creating an ideal setting for terrorism to flourish. In particular, horizontal inequalities gain greater prominence when ethnic, regional, or religious

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identities are weaponised in political competition (Langer et al., 2007; Stewart, 2008; Nwozor et al., 2023).

This paper thus adopts a political economy perspective on terrorism, situating it within the broader context of governance deficiencies, institutional breakdown, and elite domination. Within this framework, terrorism is not merely a product of ideological extremism but a symptom of broader state failure and uneven socioeconomic development. By merging Forrest's context-specific model with broader academic insights, this analysis reinforces the argument that as long as Nigeria's state apparatus remains beholden to sectional and private interests, rather than the collective good, terrorism will persist, and efforts to combat it will continue to face structural limitations (Agbiboa, 2023; Transparency International, 2022).

Mapping Terrorism in Nigeria: Grievances, Violence, and the Crisis of Counterterrorism

While Nigeria has experienced numerous forms of political violence since its independence in 1960, domestic terrorism did not become a pronounced and escalating threat until the 1990s, beginning with the oil-related insurgency in the Niger Delta. The conflict in the Niger Delta began in the 1980s as non-violent protests by local communities against multinational oil companies and the Nigerian government. The drivers have been concerns over environmental degradation, underdevelopment, and inadequate compensation for land and resource exploitation (Watts, 2007; Obi, 2009). By the early 2000s, this discontent had escalated into armed rebellion, spearheaded by groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). These groups adopted tactics typical of terrorism, utilising explosives, car bombs, and military-grade weapons to sabotage oil facilities and confront state forces (Joab-Peterside, 2010; Osaghae et al., 2007). Their arsenal reportedly included AK-47s, Czech SA VZ 58 rifles, FN-FALs, machine guns, and locally fabricated arms (Osaghae et al., 2007, p. 24).

Between 2006 and 2008 alone, there were 41 attacks on oil installations, 13 direct clashes with security forces, and over 117 recorded kidnappings. More than 300 lives were lost, and numerous others were injured (NDTCR, 2008). Although initially aimed at gaining political attention and regional equity, kidnapping, one of the insurgents' key tactics, soon evolved into a lucrative criminal enterprise, spreading beyond the Niger Delta into the Southeast and other regions. Though often dismissed as criminality, the Nigerian Terrorism (Prevention) Act of 2011 (amended in 2013) categorises such acts, including kidnapping for ransom, as terrorism.

While not all incidents of kidnapping have been directly linked to political grievances, the socioeconomic backgrounds of many perpetrators, primarily unemployed young men, and their focus on elite targets highlight persistent class-based resentment

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(Ukiwo, 2011). This supports the broader contention that terrorism in Nigeria frequently emerges from entrenched structural inequalities and unresolved grievances. In response, the Nigerian government launched the Presidential Amnesty Programme in 2009 to take out militants from the swamps and restore oil production to desired levels. The transformation of conflict from grievance-based militancy to organised criminality underscores the governance vacuum and the legitimacy deficit of the Nigerian State (Akinwale, 2010).

The second significant expression of terrorism arose with Boko Haram, an Islamist militant organisation that gained prominence in 2009 following the extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf. The group advocates the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law and vehemently opposes Western education and secular governance (Forrest, 2012; Onuoha, 2014). Since 2009, Boko Haram has executed coordinated attacks on police stations, schools, markets, religious institutions, and international targets, including the United Nations headquarters in Abuja (Walker, 2012; Zenn, 2014).

Fatalities attributed to the group vary depending on the source, but media and humanitarian reports suggest over 467 deaths in 2011, 1,266 in 2012, 1,025 in 2013, and more than 1,500 in the first quarter of 2014 (The Nation, 2014; NigerianEye, 2014). The group's most globally recognised act of violence was the 2014 abduction of over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, which sparked international condemnation and the #BringBackOurGirls campaign (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014).

The Nigerian government has responded mainly with a militarised approach, exemplified by the 2013 State of Emergency declared in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States, and the implementation of "Operation Lafiya Dole." These interventions, however, have been hampered by corruption, poor coordination among security agencies, and insufficient funding (Transparency International, 2022; Agbiboa, 2015). An incident in which South African authorities seized $9.3 million in undeclared cash allegedly intended for arms procurement highlights Nigeria's secretive and dysfunctional security spending practices (PM News, 2014).

Non-military measures, such as the establishment of Almajiri model schools to address educational marginalisation, have achieved limited results due to weak implementation and a lack of political commitment to structural reform (Alozieuwa, 2016). Additionally, elite disagreements over how to define terrorism and how best to respond have weakened national unity and undermined comprehensive security strategies (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). Although Boko Haram and MEND typify ideological and grievance-fuelled terrorism, Nigeria's security crisis has worsened with the rise of rural banditry, herder–farmer violence, and separatist-linked attacks.

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In the North-West, states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Niger have become epicentres of large-scale banditry. Initially dismissed as criminal activity, these attacks now display clear terrorist traits, including mass abductions, deliberate killings, community destruction, and ransom-based economies (ICG, 2020; Mustapha, 2021). Over 1,000 schoolchildren were kidnapped in Kaduna, Niger, and Zamfara States in 2021 alone (Amnesty International, 2021). Many of these bandit groups originate from pastoralist communities affected by marginalisation, security force abuses, and land dispossession. Some attacks have ethnic undertones, while others are opportunistic and fuelled by widespread access to arms and a failing state presence (Oyewole, 2021).

In 2022, the federal government formally designated bandit groups as terrorist organisations (Channels TV, 2022). Similarly, herder–farmer conflict in states such as Benue, Plateau, Taraba, and Nasarawa has evolved from communal clashes into violence resembling terrorism, particularly as these incidents often target civilians and involve attempts to dominate contested territories. Key drivers include land competition, climate-induced migration, and identity-based mobilisation (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019; Mbah & Akpuru-Aja, 2020).

In the Southeast, separatist violence has escalated, marked by attacks on police stations, electoral offices, and other federal institutions. These assaults have been attributed to "unknown gunmen," many of whom are allegedly linked to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its paramilitary unit, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) (Iwuoha, 2022). Although IPOB frames its campaign as a political struggle for Biafran self-determination, the use of fear tactics, orchestrated attacks, and anti-state propaganda aligns with characteristics of low-level terrorism (Campbell & Page, 2021). The federal government officially proscribed IPOB as a terrorist group in 2017, though this designation remains contentious both within and outside Nigeria (Nwozor et al., 2021).

This mapping of Nigeria's terrorist landscape reveals a highly complex and interconnected set of threats shaped by structural inequalities, elite exploitation, identity-based exclusion, and institutional fragility. Whether expressed through ideological insurgency (e.g., Boko Haram, ISWAP), resource-based militancy (e.g., MEND), or economically motivated violence (e.g., rural banditry), terrorism in Nigeria is deeply embedded in a political economy characterised by fragmented authority and a privatised State. Nigeria's current terrorism context is multi-layered and entrenched in systemic governance failure. The continued dominance of elite interests and unresolved horizontal inequalities sustain both the drivers of terrorism and the dysfunction of counterterrorism efforts (Agbiboa, 2013; Osaghae, 2007).

The Nigerian State and Contradictions of Counterterrorism

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This section discusses how the privatized Nigerian State impacts on policy, strategy, and security responses to terrorism and counterterrorism. It begins by framing the Nigerian State as a privatised State

(a) Framing the State in Nigeria as Privatised State

To understand the contradictions of counterterrorism in Nigeria, it is essential to examine the nature of the Nigerian State itself. Social science literature has offered multiple perspectives on the State, with scholars such as Laski (1961), Miliband (1969), Ake (2001), and Osaghae (2007) agreeing that the modern State constitutes the central organising authority in society, responsible for regulating social life, maintaining order, and delivering essential political goods. These goods include maintaining territorial control, enforcing law and justice, protecting citizens, developing infrastructure, and providing public services (Rotberg, 2009; Akude, 2007).

From this standpoint, the State is not only a set of institutions, comprising the military, police, bureaucracy, and judiciary, but also a strategic site of political competition and social conflict (Oyovbaire, 1980; Alapiki, 2000). In this regard, the nature of the State determines the character of politics, the level of institutional performance, and the degree of national cohesion (Ake, 2001; Ekekwe, 1986). In Nigeria, however, the State has been persistently characterised as a predatory and privatised entity, one captured by elite interests and manipulated for sectional, ethnic, and personal gains (Aaron, 2006; Osaghae, 2007; Ake, 2001).

Scholars have variously labelled the Nigerian State as a "synonym of the power elite," "a pseudo-bourgeoisie dependent on imperialism," and a "triangle of foreign and local businessmen and state officials" (Oyovbaire, 1980; Ekekwe, 1986), which Ake (2001) describes as a lack of autonomy. This lack of autonomy manifests in two ways: externally, as subservience to global capitalist interests, and internally, as elite domination over state institutions (Ake, 2001).

The latter form of non-autonomy, internal elite capture, lies at the heart of what this study identifies as the privatisation of the Nigerian State. In contrast to the Weberian ideal of a neutral, rule-based bureaucracy, the Nigerian State is directly controlled by a fractured and ethnically polarised political class (Nnoli, 1978; Alavi, 1979). As a result, the State is pulled in divergent directions by competing elite factions, each mobilising ethnic identity to access and dominate state power, leading to the centralisation of political authority and economic resources, and heightening perceptions of marginalisation and injustice, especially among excluded groups (Ekekwe, 1986; Osaghae, 2007).

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The consequences of this privatised and ethnically fragmented state structure are profound. Ake (2001) famously termed this the "political question," describing it as a condition where: (1) politics becomes warlike and zero-sum; (2) ethnic loyalties undermine national identity; (3) political leadership lacks legitimacy or accountability; and (4) violent, disorderly transitions of power become the norm (pp. 42–43). The militarisation of politics, the commodification of electoral violence (Joab-Peterside, 2005), ethnicity-based domination (Nnoli, 1998), and pervasive corruption (Fagbadebo, 2007; Olayiwola, 2013) further deepen this crisis. These structural and institutional failings have produced social and economic grievances that serve as enabling conditions for terrorism and insurgency. As this paper argues, addressing Nigeria's terrorism challenge requires confronting the foundational problem of state privatisation and elite capture.

(b) Privatised Governance, Ethnic Domination, and the Escalation of Terrorism

The relationship between the Nigerian State and terrorism cannot be fully understood without examining the effects of state privatisation on political behaviour, security governance, and public legitimacy. One of the most consequential outcomes of the State's privatisation is ethnicity-based political domination, which manifests through horizontal inequalities, that is, structural disparities among culturally defined groups in access to power, resources, and representation (Langer et al., 2007; Murshed, 2007). In Nigeria, this manifests as politics of revenue allocation, infrastructure, political appointments and recruitment into public offices of Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) that control the commanding heights of the economy, politics, and security architecture (Ibaba, 2024).

Unlike vertical inequalities, which capture individual disparities, horizontal inequalities reveal how collective identities, such as ethnicity and region, influence the exclusion and perceived injustice in the distribution of state benefits and responsibilities (Stewart, 2008). These inequalities have fueled inter-ethnic competition over control of the State and intensified perceptions of marginalisation, particularly in multiethnic settings like Delta State, where long-standing rivalries between the Ijaw and Itsekiri groups illustrate the political consequences of skewed state structures.

This relationship directly impacts the structure of security governance, as the State loses its neutrality as a provider and security for all, but becomes a fragmented apparatus captured by sectional interests; thus, weakening national coherence, and resulting in ethnic antagonisms that have been acknowledged in the literature as a precursor to terrorism (Byman, 1998; Forrest, 2012). The Niger Delta militancy was not only a reaction to environmental degradation, but also a rebellion against perceived political exclusion and underdevelopment by dominant ethnic elites (Joab-Peterside,

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2005; Ukoha & Ebiede, 2012). Similarly, Boko Haram's rise occurred in a context of social and political alienation aggravated by regional neglect and ethno-religious grievances (Walker, 2012).

The effect of privatised security responses in such contexts is particularly destabilising—state counterterrorism efforts, when perceived as ethnically driven, risk being delegitimised, no matter their strategic intent. For instance, during the Goodluck Jonathan administration, counterterrorism operations in the North were widely interpreted by some northern elites as punitive or politically motivated (Walker, 2012; Onuoha, 2014). In turn, southern elites interpreted Boko Haram as a northern political weapon aimed at discrediting Jonathan's presidency. Politicians frequently arm and deploy youth militias during elections, treating security as a tool of political leverage rather than a public good (Ake, 2001a). These militias, often left unregulated post-election, evolve into criminal networks or insurgent forces, as seen with the radicalisation of northern youths into Boko Haram and the post-amnesty criminal resurgence in the Niger Delta (Forrest, 2012; Joab-Peterside, 2005). This reduces the State's capacity to perform its functions, in addition to the loss of monopoly on violence and instability in government. The violence which characterises elections demonstrates the ongoing militarisation of Nigeria's political space (Punch, 2014; Musa, 2013).

The privatisation of the State has not only created conditions which support terrorism, but also put counterterrorism at risk. The privatisation has led to several issues and factors that constrain counterterrorism. First, privatisation leads the political leadership to ignore the public good and common interests, instead focusing on individual and sectional interests. State resources are, therefore, directed to promote and satisfy selfish and sectional interests. Following this, and as a consequence of the fractionalisation of the political elite along ethnic lines, the State is pulled in different directions by members of the political class who compete among themselves and mobilise ethnic power for that competition.

The resulting inter-ethnic competition has fuelled ethnicity-based political domination, which has undermined ethnic harmony and trust, and also brought about ethnic insecurity. Significantly, whereas this is a precondition for terrorism, the terrorist challenge and counterterrorism engagements by the Government have been interpreted and described from ethnic standpoints. Furthermore, the militarisation of politics and commoditisation of violence in the electoral process, a consequence of the privatisation of the State, which makes arms available for use against the State, has not abated.

Additionally, it fosters corruption, as funds intended for national security are diverted through informal patronage channels and oversight institutions are compromised. Equally, the analysis shows that corruption, which is perhaps the most

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evident outcome of the privatisation of the Nigerian State, has created socioeconomic grievances such as poverty in plenty and economic discrimination, which the literature has noted as preconditions for terrorism. The coincidence of poverty with group boundaries and the tendency for the population living in poverty to turn to organised crime or banditry. Additionally, poverty, particularly that which coexists with affluence, has alienated citizens from the government and leadership, eroding the solidarity between citizens and the government, and undermining the stakeholder and proprietary interests of citizens in government and society. Such citizens tend to be vulnerable to manipulation by individuals seeking to undermine the State. For example, they provide hiding places for terrorists or refuse to pass on or share information on terrorists with security operatives, either to secure their lives or simply as a demonstration of dissatisfaction with the State.

The perception of the State as corrupt and partial has a cascading effect on public cooperation with counterterrorism initiatives. Citizens, especially in marginalised regions, often refuse to share intelligence or collaborate with state security actors due to deep-rooted mistrust. Socioeconomic grievances, exacerbated by elite impunity, misgovernance, and lack of basic services, further radicalise disenfranchised populations (Piazza, 2011; Abadie, 2004). With over 112 million Nigerians living in poverty (Onuba, 2012), and regional disparities in access to opportunities and state protection, alienated populations are more likely to tolerate, support, or join insurgent movements (Whitehead, 2007; UNDP, 2023).

In sum, privatised security responses have profound implications for the structure, function, and perception of the Nigerian State:

- Structurally, they reinforce ethnicised domination, fragment national cohesion, and compromise institutional autonomy.
- Functionally, they divert security resources to elite and political agendas, hollow out the operational effectiveness of state institutions, and proliferate armed non-state actors.
- Perceptually, they damage public trust, delegitimise state authority, and diminish the willingness of citizens to engage in collective security efforts.

Terrorism in Nigeria is thus not simply the result of extremist ideologies or foreign influence; it is a consequence of systemic governance failure, where security is now a commodity.

Conclusion

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Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced a succession of violent conflicts, ranging from regional rebellions and ethnic militias to electoral violence and religious insurgencies. While early uprisings such as the Niger Delta rebellion and communal clashes exposed deep-seated structural grievances, it was the Niger Delta insurgency (2005–2009) and the emergence of Boko Haram that fundamentally redefined the scope and threat of domestic terrorism. Although the State responded with a mixture of amnesty programmes and militarised interventions, its overall capacity to combat terrorism has remained questionable.

This paper argues that conventional assessments of military strength or institutional capacity alone cannot adequately explain the crisis of counterterrorism in Nigeria. The privatised structure of the Nigerian State, and associated elite capture, ethnicised power structures, rent-seeking politics, and the commodification of violence, which has fundamentally distorted its governance priorities, also require attention. The state apparatus has been appropriated to serve narrow elite interests, rather than the public good; thereby undermining the legitimacy, impartiality, and effectiveness of its security response.

The paper concludes that Nigeria's counterterrorism failures are not merely operational, but also structural in nature. A privatised state cannot pursue public security goals with consistency or credibility, as it is embedded in a web of patronage and ethnic contestations that both fuel and protect violent actors. Therefore, meaningful counterterrorism efforts must begin with the political and institutional reformation of the Nigerian State. Reconstituting the State to prioritise public interest over elite accumulation is imperative for dismantling the enabling conditions of terrorism and restoring national security.

This highlights the dilemma the country faces in countering terrorism. The analysis suggests that as long as the Nigerian State remains privatised, counterterrorism efforts will be ineffective. Thus, the most likely course of action would be to reform the State. Significantly, the political elites, who should take the required steps to ensure these reforms are the beneficiaries of the State’s privatisation, and would most likely be hesitant to initiate the required reforms, as evidenced by their reluctance to initiate and implement public sector and expenditure reforms that would reduce the cost of governance and redistribute national revenues to fund the concerns of people with low incomes; and also legislative and constitutional reforms that will make elections transparent and reduce the cost of governance such as abolishing one of the two legislative chambers or making legislative representation part time duty.

This leaves civil society organisations (CSOs) as the most likely agents to mobilise citizens to bring about the reforms required for the State to pursue the public

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good. While the CSOs have also been accused of lacking the patriotism and honesty required for leading the vanguard that can transform the country, their role in restoring the current transitional democracy and attempts to secure the human rights of citizens and also holding the Government accountable, marks them out as the likely crusaders for reformation of the Nigerian State.

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