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## Nigeria's Civil-Military Relations and Security Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

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Nigeria's civil-military relations remain complex, characterized by insecurity and human rights abuses, including the extra-judicial killing, influenced by the country's history of transitions to civilian governments. This study examines the challenges facing Nigeria's civil-military relations, including conflicts, security challenges such as Kidnapping, Fulani-herdsmen, Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta militancy, and various communal violence that have made the country tagged as one of the unsafe countries on the continent. The study argues that these challenges have eroded trust between the military and civilian authorities, heightened tensions between the military and civilian populations, and led to significant insecurity for the Nigerian nation. To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening civilian oversight of the military, improving military-civil relations through dialogue and education, and addressing the root causes of conflicts. The study concludes that effective civil-military relations are critical to addressing Nigeria's security challenges and promoting stability, security, and development.

**Keywords:** Civil-military relations; security challenges; Boko Haram; Niger Delta militancy; communal violence

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## INTRODUCTION

Civil-Military relations remain a fundamental tool for the nation's stability. It is a necessary ingredient for development, influenced by effective national security policies and military effectiveness (Egbujiobi, 2025). However, the impact and contribution of the military to the nation's building cannot be overemphasized, given its role in maintaining national unity and security. Nigeria gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1960. Since then, the country has experienced a complex and tumultuous history of civil-military relations, marked by multiple military coups, countercoups, and periods of both military and civilian rule (Kennedy, 2024).

Nigeria's military has remained a stakeholder in the country's national development, playing a significant role in the country's politics, with several military regimes ruling the country from 1966 to 1999. The most notable military regimes were those of Generals Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979), and Sani Abacha (1993-1998). With the inception and Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999 with emergency of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military head of state, as the fourth republic president, in Nigeria's democratic system, the country has experienced a fragile democracy characterized by insecurity, human rights abuses, including extra-judicial killing (Okeke & Muoneke, 2024). Although, under the military regime in Nigeria, not that the country is not experienced any form of social vices and human rights abuses but is not as what Nigeria

society is experiencing in the recent, particularly in the areas of insecurity, human rights abuses and others due to the changes in the civil-military relations in country system as a result of the weakness of one of the great institutions of development (Titko et al., 2023). Nigeria's civil-military relations are complex, shaped by its history of military rule and transitions to civilian government. The security challenges facing the country have significant implications for civil-military relations, including erosion of trust, increased tensions, and humanitarian consequences (Shchokin et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires strengthening civilian oversight of the military, improving civil-military relations, and addressing the root causes of conflicts.

Although Nigeria is heterogeneous, with diversities in ethnic, religious, class, social-cultural, and other aspects, most nations with this nature utilize it as a source of development and progress, but Nigeria's diversities have been a source of violent conflicts and insecurity, influenced primarily by the current civil-military relations. Civil-military relations are not new in their system; they are laid down by colonial rule, principally as a force to maintain colonial order rather than to serve national interests (Andreeva, 2024). The Nigerian Army emerged from the West African Frontier Force (WAFF). Although initially established to protect the interests of the colonial masters and suppress local resistance. At the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Nigerian military was still under civilian control. Following the politics of ethnic division and the weakness of institutions, it was vulnerable to political intervention.

The researcher conducted a distinctive study on Nigeria's Civil-Military Relations and Security Challenges by exploring angles previously underexamined in existing literature. Unlike earlier works that often focus solely on military strategy or political theory, this research integrates grassroots perspectives, institutional behavior, and civilian experiences to present a more holistic view. It delves into the evolving roles of non-state actors, community-level responses, and the informal dynamics shaping civil-military interactions. By combining historical analysis with contemporary field data, the study offers fresh insights into the underlying causes of mistrust and insecurity, thereby filling critical gaps left by previous research efforts.

This study aims to critically examine the nature of civil-military relations in Nigeria and their impact on the country's persistent security challenges. It seeks to identify the institutional, political, and societal factors influencing these relations and their effects on national stability. The research addresses a significant gap in existing literature by moving beyond theoretical discussions to analyze real-life interactions between military forces and civilian populations. Previous studies have largely overlooked the grassroots implications and evolving role of civil society in security governance. This study fills that gap by offering an in-depth, context-specific exploration of both historical and contemporary dynamics.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research method to explore the complex dynamics of Nigeria's civil-military relations and the associated security challenges. Through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and case studies, the research captures diverse perspectives from military personnel, policymakers, civil society actors, and affected communities. The qualitative approach enables a nuanced understanding of the historical, political, and institutional factors shaping civil-military interactions in Nigeria. By focusing on context, meaning, and experiences, this method enables a deeper analysis of the root causes and implications of ongoing security issues, offering insights that quantitative data alone might overlook.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The Nigerian Army's intervention as military rulers played a significant role in maintaining stability and preventing the country's disintegration. Although the military

worldwide is not trained to be politicians or political administrators, the Nigerian Army's intervention as a military administrator remains one of its primary objectives and a basic responsibility in defending the nation against both internal and external threats. However, one of the landmark achievements during the military administration is the maintenance of unity and security compared to the present state of the democratic system of government.

With the inception of the Olusegun Obasanjo administration, as the new democratic government in the fourth republic, the nation has experienced drastic changes and witnessed a new dimension in Nigeria's civil-military relations backed by a legal framework that designates the roles and responsibilities of the military to civilian authority, including the Armed Forces Act that provides further regulations on the conduct and interaction of the Nigerian army within the civil sphere. Indeed, since the inception of the fourth republic as a democratic nation, Nigeria has experienced and been bedeviled by various forms of violent conflict and insecurity, which have manifested in Nigeria's domestic politics.

The increasing deployment of the military in internal security operations at many checkpoints that are officially and constitutionally under the control of the Nigerian police force raises concerns about civil-military relations, especially regarding human rights abuses, lack of accountability, and the erosion of democratic governance. Its frequent intervention in civilian affairs often leads to friction, public mistrust, and allegations of excessive force. Weak civilian oversight, corruption in the defense sector, and inadequate inter-agency cooperation further complicate environmental security. Despite these reforms, insecurity in Nigeria persisted, making the nation's problems more complex and ranking it among the continent's most unsafe nations.

Nigeria's civil-military relations have been complex, shaped by the country's history of military rule and transitions to civilian government. The military has played a significant role in shaping the nation's political landscape, often intervening in governance affairs. Since the 15th of January 1966, when the army seized power from the democratically elected government, Nigeria has witnessed enough military rule. Finer (1962) describes four types of civil-military relations: the military exercising legitimate power over the civilian government; using threats or blackmail; displacing a civilian government and replacing it with another; and overthrowing a civilian government to take charge of state affairs. To sustain civilian control over the military, Huntington (1957) categorizes mechanisms into 'objective' and 'subjective' mechanisms. The objective mechanism involves a clear division between political and military roles, while the subjective mechanism emphasizes the military's formal subordination to civilian leaders (Okeke & Muoneke, 2024).

In Nigeria, the military's role in civil-military relations has evolved significantly. Initially focused on internal security, the army has transitioned towards engaging in peacekeeping operations both domestically and internationally. This shift reflects a broader commitment to upholding stability and security. Key principles guiding Nigerian Army civil-military relations include respect for the rule of law, transparency and accountability, civilian supremacy, and professionalism and ethical conduct. These principles underscore the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship to uphold national security and societal stability.

The mechanisms and methods of civilian control over the military have been influenced by various theories, including the structural theory of civil-military relations, which predicts that the strength or weakness of civilian control depends on the degree of internal and external threats faced by the state. In conclusion, Nigeria's civil-military relations are shaped by its complex history, and sustaining civilian control over the military requires a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms and theories that influence these relations.

### **History of Civil-Military Relations in Nigeria**

Nigeria's civil-military relations have been complex and tumultuous, especially during the First, Second, and Third Republics. The First Republic, in particular, was marked by a resentful military, dissatisfied with the political class and the British-imposed tripartite political system. According to Ademoyega (1981), the military had ideological revolutionaries who felt disconnected from the civilian leaders. This lack of synergy led to the military coup, with soldiers claiming they acted to save Nigeria from collapse and disintegration. They saw themselves as nationalists, carrying out a nationalistic role (Egbujiobi, 2025). The Second Republic was short-lived, lasting only four years before the military intervened again. This time, the military perceived the civilian leaders as corrupt and ineffective. The Third Republic saw the military retain its hegemony, despite the transition to democratic rule at the state level. General Ibrahim Babangida's decision to hand power to an interim administrator rather than the elected president further solidified military control over civilian rule.

### **Roles of the Army in society**

Policy implies that the military can be used to suppress insurrection or revolution within the state. Internal security implies that the military can, in a limited way, contribute to maintaining law and order through an integrated approach to conflict management within the state. The Nigerian 1999 constitution, section 217 states that there shall be armed forces for the federation which shall consist of an Army, a Navy, and an Air Force. Their roles are stated as follows: (a) Defending Nigeria from external aggression. This role aligns with Huntington's military security policy. This is considered by most scholars to be the military's primary duty. (b) Maintaining its territorial integrity and securing its borders from violation on land, sea, or air. (c) Suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the President, but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly. (d) Performing such other functions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly.

The military must operate on the basis of professional training to serve the democratic state and be subject to civilian control. According to Finer (1962; Abdel Aziz, 2023), the military should display a high level of professionalism. The military should view its role through the lens of subverting internal and external threats and of international peacekeeping.

Nigeria's military has a multifaceted role, as outlined in Section 217 of the 1999 Constitution. Their primary duties include defending the country from external aggression, maintaining territorial integrity, and securing borders.

In addition to these core responsibilities, the military is also authorized to:

- **Suppress Insurrection:** Act in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon by the President, subject to conditions prescribed by the National Assembly.
- **Maintain Law and Order:** Contribute to maintaining law and order through an integrated approach to conflict management.
- **International Peacekeeping:** Participate in international peacekeeping operations.
- **Other Functions:** Perform other functions prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly. To effectively carry out these roles, the military must operate on the basis of professional training, subject itself to civilian control, and display a high level of professionalism, as Finer (1962) emphasized.

### **Nigeria's Civil-Military Relations in the Fourth Republic**

The civil-military relations in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have been shaped by the country's complex history of military rule and democratic transitions. To effectively control the military, the civilian government has employed various tools, including compulsory retirement of senior military officers, appointment of service chiefs without legislative approval, and establishment of civilian supremacy (Roka, 2022). Building strong civil-

military relations in Nigeria requires a delicate balance of power and responsibilities. To achieve this, it's essential to establish clear boundaries and areas of focus. Operational Control: The military should indeed retain operational control, allowing them to execute their duties effectively without civilian interference (Jeshurun, 1989; Shchokin et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the civilian government should focus on policy control, setting the overall direction and objectives for national defense and security. This division of labor will ensure that each entity plays to its strengths. To foster a positive and professional relationship between the military and civilians, it's crucial to: Re-establish Ideological Foundations: The military should rediscover its ideological roots, guiding its conduct and interactions with the political class (Morgan-Owen & Gould, 2022). Military personnel should uphold professionalism as their top priority, recognizing their role as protectors of civilians rather than instruments of intimidation. Ensure Accountability and Civil Control: The civilian government must ensure that the military is accountable and subject to civil control, promoting a cordial relationship between the two entities (Rivera-Páez & Uribe-Cáceres, 2022).

### **Key Tools Used by Civilian Governments:**

President Olusegun Obasanjo compulsorily retired 93 generals and officers who had occupied political offices to prevent coup plotting and ensure civilian control. Appointment of Service Chiefs: Obasanjo and subsequent presidents, including Yar'Adua and Jonathan, appointed service chiefs without legislative approval, maintaining civilian control over the military. The civilian government has ensured that the military is subordinate to civilian authority, with the president serving as the commander-in-chief. Despite these efforts, challenges persist in civil-military relations, including military intimidation of civilians, human rights abuses, and the need for effective legislative oversight (Egbujiobi, 2025; Wilén & Strömbom, 2022). The Nigerian Senate has played a crucial role in overseeing the military, but more needs to be done to ensure accountability and transparency. Overall, Nigeria's civil-military relations have evolved significantly since the transition to democratic rule in 1999. While challenges remain, the country has made progress in establishing civilian control over the military and promoting democratic governance.

### **Challenges of Civil-Military Relations in Nigeria**

Ensuring a strong military while maintaining democratic control is a delicate balance. To achieve this, the civilian government should establish clear lines of authority and oversight mechanisms (Breuer et al., 2023). The military should be subordinate to civilian authority, with the president or head of state serving as the commander-in-chief. The legislature should have the power to approve military appointments, budgets, and operations, ensuring accountability and transparency. Nigeria's 1999 constitution has played a significant role in shaping the country's civil-military relations. By granting the President the power to determine the operational use of the armed forces and appoint service chiefs, the Constitution has ensured civilian control over the military. This is a significant departure from the past, particularly during the Second Republic, when the Minister of Defense was often left in the dark about military decisions.

The National Assembly's power to make laws regulating the President's authority as Commander-in-Chief further reinforces civilian oversight. This constitutional framework has helped to prevent military incursions into politics and ensured that the armed forces remain accountable to the democratic government (Nainggolan & Katharina, 2020). In recent years, the military has taken steps to improve its relationship with civilians, particularly in the North-east region. The establishment of desk offices to receive and investigate complaints about human rights violations is a notable example. This initiative has been praised by human rights bodies as a "novel and bold" move, which could significantly improve civil-military relations.

To build on this progress, it's essential for the democratic government to ensure that the powers granted to it are used to limit the excesses of the armed forces, particularly in their dealings with the public. This will not only prevent military incursions into politics but also promote a culture of accountability and respect for human rights within the military.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion above, by implementing these measures, Nigeria can develop a robust, balanced civil-military relationship, enabling the civilian government to exercise effective control over the military while maintaining national security and stability. Professionalism and Training: The military should prioritize professionalism, training, and education to ensure that personnel understand their role in a democratic society. Establishing open communication channels between civilian leaders and military commanders can prevent misunderstandings and ensure effective cooperation. In Nigeria's case, the government has made efforts to improve civil-military relations, but challenges persist. The use of military force in internal security operations and during elections has raised concerns about the militarization of politics. To address these issues, Nigeria can draw on international best practices, such as Strengthening institutions, like the National Assembly's Committee on Defense, to enhance oversight and accountability. Reforming the security sector to ensure that military and police forces are accountable to civilian authorities can help prevent human rights abuses. Encouraging dialogue and cooperation between civilian leaders, military commanders, and civil society organizations can foster mutual understanding and trust. By implementing these measures, Nigeria can strengthen democratic control over the military, ensuring a balanced and effective relationship that prioritizes national security, human rights, and democratic governance.

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