

From Protection to Repression: Nigerian Security Agencies as Political Instruments of Oppression in the Fourth Republic, 1999-2025

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Abstract

Nigeria's Fourth Republic restored elections, courts, legislatures, political parties and constitutional rights, but it did not fully transform the security institutions inherited from colonial policing and military rule. This article examines how agencies created to protect citizens have often become tools for controlling protests, intimidating voters, monitoring opposition groups and protecting political elites. It introduces the idea of coercive democratic governance, which describes a democratic system where formal institutions exist, but security practices reduce civic freedom and weaken public participation. Using historical-institutional analysis, documentary evidence and selected cases on protest policing, election security, opposition control and inter-agency overlap, the article argues that repression in Nigeria is not only occasional misconduct. It is sustained by centralized command, political appointments, security narratives, weak oversight, unclear funding and limited punishment for abuse. The study also recognizes that Nigeria faces serious threats such as terrorism, kidnapping, separatist violence, communal conflict and election disorder. Therefore, the issue is not whether Nigeria needs strong security agencies, but whether they serve citizens or rulers. The article concludes that democratic consolidation requires transparent security funding, independent oversight, rights-based protest policing, accountable election security and clear sanctions against abuse. It calls for reforms rooted in legality and public trust.

Keywords: Nigeria, Security Agencies, Fourth Republic, Elections, Repression

I. Introduction

The restoration of civilian rule in 1999 was widely interpreted as a constitutional break with military authoritarianism. Nigeria regained elected executives, representative legislatures, political parties, courts and formal guarantees of fundamental rights. Yet this democratic architecture emerged alongside security agencies whose institutional cultures were shaped by colonial policing, military command, centralized authority and executive dominance. The central puzzle of this article is therefore direct: why do agencies created to protect citizens in a constitutional democracy repeatedly function as instruments of intimidation, protest containment, electoral manipulation, surveillance and opposition control?

This article distinguishes citizen protection from regime protection. Citizen protection refers to lawful, proportionate, accountable and rights-respecting security action directed toward public safety and constitutional order. Regime protection occurs when coercive institutions are deployed to protect office-holders, ruling parties, dominant coalitions or official narratives from criticism, electoral defeat, protest or public accountability. The distinction is essential because Nigeria faces severe threats: insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, separatist violence, communal conflict, organized crime and election-related disorder. A serious analysis cannot treat every use of force as oppression. However, insecurity should not become a blanket justification for selective enforcement, arbitrary detention, militarized protest policing or the use of security agencies to discipline political opponents. The democratic test is whether coercive power is legally restrained and publicly accountable.

Existing scholarship explains parts of the problem. Omeni (2022) places policing at the centre of Nigerian political development, showing that police institutions were never peripheral to state power. Nwankpa (2022) describes the Fourth Republic as a militarized democracy in which civilian rule retains military logic. Ojedokun and Aderinto (2025) and Bashir and Jibril (2025) identify the politicization of law enforcement through appointment control, partisan deployment and selective enforcement. Umeh, Onyebuchi and Ebi (2026), Dim and Chow (2026), and Iwuoha (2021) connect protest repression to shrinking civic space and the enduring memory of military rule. Electoral-security studies similarly show how coercive deployment can shape voter confidence and opposition mobility (Essien, 2025; Chinedu and Oparaku, 2024).

The originality of this article lies in integrating these debates into a single explanatory framework. It argues that Nigerian security agencies are not always oppressive, but the architecture of security governance repeatedly makes them available for regime-security purposes. This availability is historically produced, institutionally reproduced and politically incentivized. Colonial policing created a coercive grammar of authority; military rule normalized command security; civilian governments after 1999 preserved and adapted coercive institutions for electoral management, protest control and elite protection. The result is not open dictatorship but coercive democratic governance: a political order in which democratic forms coexist with authoritarian security practices.

Four research questions guide the analysis. First, how have Nigerian security agencies functioned as instruments of political control in the Fourth Republic? Second, what historical continuities connect colonial policing, military rule and contemporary security practice? Third, how have civilian governments since 1999 preserved, adapted or legitimized coercive security practices? Fourth, what reforms are required to separate citizen protection from regime protection? The argument is deliberately limited. It does not claim that Nigeria is simply authoritarian or that all security action is illegitimate. It claims that democratic consolidation cannot be judged only by elections; it must also be judged by whether citizens can organize, oppose, protest, vote and criticize without being treated as threats to the state.

The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it refines the distinction between public security,

citizen security and regime security, thereby avoiding the common error of treating security as a neutral administrative field. Theoretically, it links historical institutionalism, securitization theory and state repression theory into a sequence that explains capacity, justification, direction and impunity. Empirically, it reads protests, elections, opposition surveillance and inter-agency overlap as connected expressions of a broader security order rather than as isolated scandals. This framing is important for journal readership because it converts a familiar Nigerian problem into a general problem of democratic consolidation in postcolonial states: how civilian governments can preserve authoritarian security habits while maintaining electoral form.

II. Methodology and Analytical Approach

The article adopts a qualitative historical-institutional design supported by documentary analysis and process tracing. Historical institutionalism is appropriate because Nigeria's security agencies carry inherited routines, command structures, legal assumptions and informal norms across regime transitions. The 1999 transition changed the constitutional form of government but did not automatically transform the coercive architecture of policing, intelligence, internal military deployment, detention and public-order management. The method therefore traces how inherited institutions are reproduced, adapted or contested under civilian rule.

Documentary sources include scholarly literature on policing, civil-military relations, security-sector reform, securitization and state repression; reports from rights organizations and election observers; public statements by state actors; and secondary accounts of selected protest and electoral episodes. The empirical analysis is organized around four case clusters rather than a comprehensive catalogue of abuses: protest policing, election security, opposition surveillance and the security assemblage formed by police, military, intelligence and paramilitary overlap. These clusters are selected because they expose different mechanisms of coercive governance: securitization of dissent, partisan vulnerability of election security, bureaucratic disciplining of opposition and mandate-blurring among coercive institutions.

The study acknowledges evidentiary limits. Security votes are opaque, classified operations are difficult to verify, official data on complaints and prosecutions are fragmented, and many abuses are underreported. These limitations require careful wording. The claim is not that every security expenditure funds repression, every deployment is partisan or every security agency acts uniformly. The stronger claim is that centralized command, fiscal opacity, weak oversight and low punishment create institutional conditions under which coercion can be politically instrumentalized. Future research should disaggregate agencies, administrations, regions and types of operation more systematically.

The analysis therefore uses triangulation rather than a single evidentiary source. Rights reports are read alongside election-observer findings, legal-institutional analysis and scholarly interpretation. Official denials are not dismissed automatically, but they are assessed against patterns of repeated allegation, delayed accountability and weak institutional sanction. This approach strengthens validity by treating repression as a process that is documented through multiple traces: deployment patterns, legal framing, arrests, public statements, inquiry outcomes, citizen testimony and institutional silence.

The article also follows a negative-case logic. It treats genuine security threats as analytically important rather than as excuses to be ignored. Counterinsurgency, anti-kidnapping operations, election protection and crowd management may all be legitimate where they are lawful, necessary and proportionate. This allows the study to identify repression more precisely: not as the mere presence of uniforms or force, but as the selective, excessive or politically directed use of coercion against rights-bearing citizens.

III. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual problem is not whether the Nigerian state requires security agencies, but whose security those agencies most reliably defend. In constitutional theory, the police, armed forces, intelligence services and paramilitary bodies exist to protect life, enforce law, preserve public order and defend territorial sovereignty. In practice, especially in postcolonial states with weak oversight, coercive institutions may drift from public protection into political control. Protection refers here to lawful, proportionate and accountable action aimed at citizens and constitutional order. Repression refers to coercive state action used to restrict dissent, protest, opposition, journalism, digital activism, electoral competition or civic freedoms. Oppression is broader: a durable structure of fear, domination and unequal citizenship sustained through coercive institutions. State security protects territorial integrity and constitutional authority; regime security protects incumbents and ruling coalitions; citizen security places legality, legitimacy, accountability and human dignity at the centre of security practice.

Three theoretical anchors guide the article. Historical institutionalism explains the persistence of inherited coercive structures. Colonial policing and military rule did not mechanically produce contemporary repression, but they created templates of centralization, hierarchy, secrecy, obedience and distance from citizens (Pierson, 2000; Thelen, 1999; Igba, 2026). Securitization theory explains how rulers convert political contestation into existential threat narratives that justify exceptional measures (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998; Waever, 1995). In Nigeria, protest, separatist agitation, digital activism, opposition organizing and critical journalism may be framed as threats to order, unity or sovereignty. State repression theory explains why governments use coercion selectively against challengers when perceived threat is high and accountability costs are low (Davenport, 2007; Earl, 2011).

Together these theories form a causal sequence. Inherited coercive institutions create capacity; securitizing narratives provide justification; executive control supplies direction; weak oversight reduces punishment; partisan incentives determine targets. Through this sequence, protection can mutate into repression, and repeated repression can harden into oppression. The framework is therefore neither anti-state nor anti-security. It accepts that Nigeria requires effective coercive capacity against genuine violence. Its concern is the political condition under which that capacity abandons citizen protection and becomes available for regime preservation.

The framework also clarifies the difference between abuse and structure. Individual misconduct matters, but the recurring availability of security agencies for political purposes cannot be explained by bad officers alone. It is produced when appointment systems reward loyalty, budgets conceal discretion, oversight institutions lack enforcement power and security language transforms political disagreement into danger. This is why reform cannot stop at training or ethical reorientation. It must address the political economy and command incentives that make coercive loyalty valuable.

Normatively, the article evaluates security practice through five democratic criteria: legality, necessity, proportionality, impartiality and answerability. Legality asks whether coercion is grounded in law rather than command preference. Necessity asks whether less restrictive alternatives were available. Proportionality asks whether the level of force corresponds to the threat. Impartiality asks whether similar actors are treated similarly regardless of party, class, ethnicity, religion or proximity to power. Answerability asks whether victims can obtain remedy and whether agencies can be compelled to explain and correct abuse. These criteria help distinguish hard but legitimate security from coercive political management.

Analytical element	Meaning in this article	Nigerian application
Inherited coercive capacity	Command structures and institutional routines carried across regimes	Colonial policing, military rule and centralized command
Securitizing justification	Framing dissent or opposition as existential threat	Public-order rhetoric, anti-terror discourse and protest policing
Executive direction	Political control over coercive deployment	Appointment politics, security votes and partisan command
Weak accountability	Low probability of sanction for abuse	Fragmented oversight, delayed inquiries and impunity
Regime outcome	Coercion protects rulers over citizens	Election intimidation, protest suppression and monitoring

IV. Historical Genealogy of Coercive Security

The coercive tendencies of Nigerian security agencies cannot be adequately understood if the analysis begins in 1999. Civilian rule restored constitutional institutions, but it did not erase older habits of policing, intelligence gathering, internal military deployment and protest control. Historically, security institutions in Nigeria were formed less as citizen-service bodies than as instruments for defending ruling authority. Colonial policing was designed to secure imperial power, protect commercial extraction, enforce taxation and discipline resistance. The police were therefore not merely crime-control agents; they were instruments of governance over populations that had not consented to colonial rule. Omeni's history of Nigerian policing demonstrates that the police have long been entangled with political authority rather than evolving as neutral civic institutions (Omeni, 2022).

This argument must avoid colonial determinism. Many institutions have colonial roots, but their later behaviour depends on reforms, political incentives, constitutional safeguards and social resistance. Colonial policing created the initial grammar of coercion; postcolonial governments repeatedly reactivated and reinterpreted it. Igba (2026) identifies overcentralization, militarized police practice, political manipulation and low public trust as contemporary continuities. The continuity is not institutional sameness but political logic: security agencies remain more accountable upward to authority than outward to citizens. This logic helps explain why the language of public order can easily become the practice of political control.

The same caution applies to military legacies. It is inadequate to say that present repression occurs simply because Nigeria once experienced military rule. The more precise claim is that military rule normalized certain instruments and expectations: centralized command, secrecy, emergency reasoning, intelligence surveillance and internal deployment. Civilian politicians did not merely inherit these tools passively; they discovered that the tools could be useful within competitive politics. In this sense, post-1999 coercion is both inherited and chosen.

Indirect rule localized coercion by empowering native authorities, warrant chiefs, court messengers, tax agents and local police structures to enforce colonial policy. Enforcement often arrived through familiar local intermediaries backed by imperial power. This history matters because contemporary formal agencies

frequently operate alongside party thugs, vigilantes, private escorts, politically connected guards and informal coercive networks. Babalola and Skoczylis (2026) describe this as the commodification of security: resources constitutionally meant for public protection are diverted toward elite, private or politically connected interests. The colonial and contemporary systems are not identical, but they share a structural resemblance in which protection is unevenly distributed and proximity to power influences whether one receives security or becomes its target.

Military rule intensified the command logic of security governance. From 1966 to 1999, successive regimes normalized secrecy, detention, surveillance, emergency powers, decrees and executive command. Military rule did not merely interrupt democratic development; it reshaped political imagination by teaching rulers that command could substitute for consent and citizens that force was an ordinary language of state response. Nwankpa's account of militarized democracy is persuasive because militarization can survive formal democratization in budgets, deployments, weapons, public-order doctrine and leadership style (Nwankpa, 2022). Dim and Chow (2026) read #EndSARS through this lens, arguing that civilian democracy retains a political hangover from military rule.

Civilian rule did not automatically produce democratic control over coercion. Alli (2026) argues that civilian supremacy in Nigeria operates within a limited-access order shaped by elite bargaining, patronage, politicized appointments and weak oversight. This distinction is crucial: civilian control is not the same as democratic control. A civilian president or governor may exercise personalized command over coercive institutions without subjecting them to independent scrutiny. The Fourth Republic therefore did not abolish command security; it civilianized parts of it, constitutionalized parts of it and selectively redeployed it within electoral democracy. The historical genealogy leads to a sharper claim: Nigeria is not merely haunted by colonial and military pasts; contemporary civilian actors repeatedly reactivate those pasts because coercive institutions remain useful for executive dominance, protest control, electoral management and opposition discipline.

V. Empirical Analysis: Dissent, Elections, Opposition and the Security Assemblage

Protest Policing and the Criminalization of Dissent

Protest policing reveals one of the clearest routes through which democratic expression is transformed into a security problem. From Occupy Nigeria in 2012 to #EndSARS in 2020 and #EndBadGovernance in 2024, protest has frequently been interpreted not only as civic participation but as an incipient threat to order, regime legitimacy or national security. Ojedokun and Aderinto (2025) show that public-order policing in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is shaped by political interests. Yet protest repression is not produced by the police alone. Soldiers, intelligence personnel, civil defence officials and other coercive actors may enter the protest field, creating a layered response in which mandates become blurred.

Occupy Nigeria illustrated how economic grievance can be reclassified as a threat when it generates mass civic energy. The protests began over fuel subsidy removal, but the state's reaction showed how quickly economic dissent could be folded into public-order anxiety. The #EndSARS movement deepened the contradiction because it directly challenged police violence and impunity. It was digitally organized, youth-led, horizontally structured and globally visible. The state confronted not only street protest but networked civic power. Protesters framed the movement as democratic repair; state actors often treated it as disorder, sabotage or destabilization. The response to #EndSARS therefore became a contest over narrative as much as territory.

The #EndBadGovernance protests of 2024 indicated that the cycle did not end with #EndSARS. Reports of excessive force, mass detentions and intimidation were followed by official denial and promises of review.

The central issue is not to assume that every official denial is false or every activist claim complete. The deeper question is why Nigerian protest policing repeatedly produces allegations, denial, weak accountability and public distrust. Repression in the Fourth Republic often works through legality, bureaucratic denial, permit regimes and discretionary enforcement as much as through direct force. Protest repression becomes pedagogical: it teaches citizens the limits of permissible dissent.

This pedagogical function is central to the politics of fear. A single crackdown can affect people who were never arrested, beaten or charged, because the memory of coercion travels through families, campuses, professional associations, digital networks and neighbourhoods. The state does not need to repress every protester to discipline protest politics. It needs only to make the cost of dissent uncertain enough that citizens self-regulate before entering public space.

Election Security and Political Intimidation

Election security occupies an analytically ambiguous position. Elections require protection because Nigerian contests have been marked by ballot snatching, armed attacks, voter intimidation, attacks on officials and localized violence. The absence of security can itself disenfranchise citizens. Yet security deployment may become partisan when it protects incumbents, intimidates opposition supporters, obstructs observers or selectively enforces electoral law. Essien's question of whether Nigerian presidential election security is professional or partisan is therefore apt (Essien, 2025). The issue is not whether agencies should be present during elections, but whether their presence expands democratic confidence or produces coercive uncertainty.

The distinction between legitimate protection and intimidation rests on conduct, command structure and perceived neutrality. Chinedu and Oparaku (2024) argue that partisan security agencies compromise electoral credibility through intimidation, unequal protection and selective enforcement. A rigorous formulation avoids the overstatement that every officer at every election acts politically. The stronger claim is that Nigeria's electoral-security architecture is structurally vulnerable to partisan capture because operational control is embedded in a political system marked by executive dominance, patronage and weak accountability. Even where personnel act professionally, public confidence may remain low if citizens believe the chain of command is politically compromised.

The 2019 and 2023 elections demonstrate that electoral credibility is produced by an ecosystem in which logistics, technology, party behaviour, legal adjudication and security deployment interact. Security agencies alone do not explain credibility crises, but coercive deployment can shape voter confidence, opposition mobility and the perceived fairness of outcomes. Regional variation also matters. In some areas, security presence may reassure voters facing armed groups; in others, it may frighten citizens who associate uniforms with partisan intimidation or past abuse. Election security becomes oppressive not by mere presence, but when its coercive authority is selectively aligned with political advantage.

This is why election-security reform must move beyond numerical deployment. A large number of officers does not guarantee neutrality, and neutrality cannot be presumed merely because personnel wear federal uniforms. Credibility requires transparent rules of engagement, published chains of responsibility, sanctions for partisan conduct, protection for observers and clear separation between election duty and incumbent protection. Without these safeguards, security may secure the polling environment in form while distorting democratic competition in substance.

Opposition Politics, Surveillance and Selective Enforcement

Political repression does not always appear as spectacular violence. In the Fourth Republic, it often operates through low-visibility techniques: surveillance, invitations by security agencies, detention threats,

roadblocks, bail restrictions, permit denial, selective prosecution and strategic timing of arrests. These instruments preserve the language of legality while imposing costs on opposition activity. Bashir and Jibril (2025) identify command structures, partisan appointments and elite capture as mechanisms through which security agencies become politically available. Politicization is visible not only when state agents openly attack opposition figures, but when legal discretion is applied unevenly.

Democratic states have legitimate authority to investigate crime, terrorism, incitement and threats to public safety. Therefore, not every arrest of an opposition figure is repression. The analytical test is consistency, proportionality, judicial compliance, transparency and equality before the law. Where opposition figures, activists, journalists or civic groups are treated with severity while politically connected actors enjoy protection, legality becomes a cover for political discipline. This distinction is especially important in matters involving separatist mobilization. Ojewale and Osasona (2025) rightly note that terror-group designation may respond to genuine security threats, but it may also delegitimize organizations perceived as threats to state authority. The danger arises when security labels stretch to cover peaceful protest, legal advocacy, digital activism or opposition mobilization.

Surveillance and selective enforcement are significant because they generate compliance without always producing visible casualties. A protest leader who receives repeated security invitations may self-censor. A journalist whose equipment is seized may avoid future coverage. A party organizer blocked at a checkpoint may miss a rally without becoming a formal political prisoner. These practices are difficult to measure because they operate through anticipation, fear and administrative friction. Coercive governance is therefore often bureaucratic; its effectiveness lies in making citizens calculate the personal cost of exercising constitutional freedoms.

This low-visibility repression is particularly damaging because it is difficult to litigate and easy to deny. A violent crackdown may attract international attention, but bureaucratic harassment can be represented as routine administration. The cumulative effect is nevertheless substantial: civic organizations spend resources on legal defence, journalists modify coverage, protesters negotiate with police in fear, and opposition actors organize under uncertainty. Democratic participation is thereby narrowed without the state necessarily declaring emergency rule.

The Security Assemblage

The Nigerian case is better understood as a security assemblage than as the conduct of isolated agencies. A security assemblage is a network of coercive institutions whose formal mandates differ but whose operations overlap during protest control, election deployment, intelligence monitoring, public-order enforcement and internal security operations. The police enforce law and public order; the military defends territory but increasingly enters domestic spaces; the Department of State Services conducts internal-security intelligence; the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps protects infrastructure; and other paramilitary formations perform border, immigration, correctional or auxiliary functions. In practice, these agencies may converge around the same political task.

This concept improves on single-agency explanations. Omeni (2022) restores policing to the centre of Nigerian political history, while Nwankpa (2022) foregrounds militarized logic within civilian rule. Both are necessary. The police operate under the shadow of militarized practice, while the military increasingly performs internal roles that should ordinarily be governed by civilian policing. The result is mandate overlap, blurred accountability and institutional rivalry. When harm occurs, responsibility can be diffused across agencies and command structures. Citizens encounter the state as a coercive field rather than a single identifiable institution.

This assemblage also complicates reform. Calls for state police or community policing may improve responsiveness, but they may also decentralize repression if captured by governors, ethnic majorities, local ruling parties or wealthy patrons. Onyeozili et al. (2021) are right that communities should participate in producing security, but community policing must be tied to constitutional safeguards, professional standards and independent complaint mechanisms. The deeper question is not federal police versus state police; it is how to construct accountable coercive power across federal, state and community levels.

The assemblage perspective also explains why accountability often fails after abuses. Police may claim that soldiers controlled a scene; soldiers may say they were deployed under civil authority; intelligence agencies may invoke secrecy; political executives may deny operational knowledge; commissions may issue recommendations without prosecution. This circular diffusion of responsibility is itself a mechanism of impunity. It makes coercive power visible to citizens at the moment of enforcement but obscure to accountability institutions afterward.

Across protest, elections, opposition politics and inter-agency overlap, the pattern is consistent. Nigerian security agencies cannot be understood through formal mandates alone. They operate within a political field where security power may discipline dissent, shape electoral competition, monitor opposition and protect incumbent authority. This does not mean every deployment is illegitimate. It means that genuine insecurity provides a language through which exceptional discretion can be normalized. The state claims to protect citizens, yet its coercive institutions may protect power from citizens.

VI. Political Economy, Accountability and Reform

Repression persists not simply because Nigeria inherited authoritarian institutions, but because civilian democracy has repeatedly found coercion useful. The country possesses constitutions, courts, elections, legislative committees, rights commissions, media scrutiny and civil society organizations, yet security agencies continue to be implicated in protest suppression, electoral intimidation, selective enforcement and elite protection. The analytical problem is not the absence of democratic institutions but their weak capacity to discipline coercive power. Coercion survives because it is politically profitable, fiscally insulated and weakly punished.

Security votes are central to this political economy. Confidential security expenditure may be justified where disclosure would compromise operations. In Nigeria, however, the scale and opacity of security-related spending often exceed the logic of operational secrecy. Lawal (2020) emphasizes budgetary control, professionalism, human-rights compliance and rule-of-law discipline as pillars of accountable security governance. The problem is that these principles operate weakly where security votes are treated as executive prerogatives rather than public funds subject to scrutiny. Opaque funding expands executive discretion; discretion enables selective deployment; selective deployment protects incumbents; weak auditing lowers the cost of abuse. Security votes do not automatically prove repression, but they create a fiscal environment in which repression can be financed, concealed and denied.

Oversight failure is equally important. Nigeria does not lack oversight institutions; rather, existing institutions are weak, fragmented and politically vulnerable. Parliament can summon officials, courts can issue judgments, rights commissions can receive complaints, civil society can document abuses and commissions of inquiry can investigate crises. Yet these mechanisms often intervene after harm has occurred and frequently lack enforcement power. Repression is not always dramatic. It may occur through permits denied, rallies disrupted, activists watched, opposition figures detained, cases delayed or complaints ignored. The quiet administration of fear may be as politically effective as open violence.

Impunity is not only the failure to punish individual abuse; it is an institutional memory that teaches

agencies what the political system will tolerate. When officers repeatedly observe that unlawful detention, excessive force, torture, electoral intimidation or selective enforcement rarely produces punishment, coercion becomes organizationally rational. Umeh et al. (2026) show how repression adapts to democratic language through public order, national security, cyber regulation and anti-terrorism. Dim and Chow (2026) add that many citizens experience civilian rule as the continuation of military authoritarianism under electoral symbols. Impunity protects perpetrators and educates citizens into lowered expectations of justice.

Reform must therefore change incentives rather than merely deliver training workshops, temporary panels or public apologies. Independent civilian oversight boards should have subpoena powers, protected budgets, investigative autonomy and authority to refer cases for prosecution. Federal and state security votes should be audited through confidential but independent mechanisms that protect operational secrecy while preventing political misuse. Major security agencies should publish annual human-rights compliance records, including complaints received, disciplinary actions taken, judgments obeyed, compensation paid and unresolved cases. Election-security protocols should criminalize partisan deployment, voter intimidation, observer obstruction and selective protection of candidates. Protest-policing rules should codify proportional force, arrest documentation and protection of peaceful assembly. Military deployment in domestic protest contexts should be prohibited except under clearly defined emergency law, subject to legislative notification and judicial review.

A credible reform programme must also protect security personnel from partisan misuse. Officers should not be forced to choose between professional rules and political commands. Clear operational guidelines, whistle-blower protections, independent disciplinary boards and judicially enforceable rights standards would reduce the pressure to obey unlawful orders. Democratic accountability is not hostile to security agencies; it can strengthen professionalism by insulating agencies from rulers who seek to convert public institutions into private instruments.

The reform agenda must also engage decentralization carefully. Igba (2026) identifies overcentralization as a key weakness in Nigeria's policing architecture, but state police without accountability may transfer coercive discretion from the federal executive to governors. Community policing can improve trust only where communities are inclusive and rights-respecting. Democratic security requires a layered model: local participation, professional training, independent complaints systems, judicial supervision, transparent budgeting and enforceable punishment. The goal is not weaker security but constitutional security: coercive power that is effective against violence yet bounded by law and answerable to citizens.

Implementation should be sequenced. Immediate reforms should focus on disclosure, complaint handling, detention documentation and protest rules of engagement because these are administratively achievable. Medium-term reforms should address recruitment, promotion, training, human-rights compliance and independent disciplinary systems. Long-term reform should redesign the constitutional and fiscal relationship between security agencies and executive power. Without sequencing, reform language may remain ambitious but operationally empty.

For policy practice, the key indicator of progress should not be the number of reform committees established, but the number of enforceable consequences produced. Democratic security reform becomes credible when court orders are obeyed, compensation is paid, abusive officers are disciplined, unlawful commands are refused, annual data are published and citizens can challenge coercive action without retaliation. These measurable outcomes would move reform from institutional symbolism to institutional constraint.

VII. Conclusion

Nigeria's Fourth Republic demonstrates that democratic institutions can coexist with coercive practices that narrow the substance of citizenship. The restoration of elections and civilian rule did not fully transform the deeper architecture of security governance. Colonial policing created a logic of authority-centred coercion; military rule normalized command security; post-1999 civilian governments preserved and adapted these structures for protest control, electoral management, opposition discipline and elite protection. The result is coercive democratic governance: a formally democratic order in which security institutions may protect constitutional authority in principle while protecting incumbents in practice.

The article has argued that Nigerian security agencies are not always oppressive, and Nigeria's severe insecurity means the state cannot abandon coercive capacity. However, democratic legitimacy depends on the distinction between lawful protection and political repression. Security becomes oppressive when force is selective, partisan, excessive, opaque, unaccountable or directed against peaceful civic participation. The most important finding is that repression in Nigeria is institutional rather than merely episodic, administrative as well as violent, and assemblage-based rather than agency-specific. Police, military, intelligence and paramilitary bodies often converge in ways that blur mandates and diffuse responsibility.

The path forward is not anti-security reform but democratic security reform. Citizen protection must be separated from regime protection through transparent security financing, independent oversight, judicial review, human-rights compliance, accountable election deployment, rights-based protest policing and enforceable sanctions for abuse. Democracy cannot be measured only by the regularity of elections. It must be measured by whether citizens can speak, organize, protest, vote, criticize and oppose without being transformed into enemies of the state. Where security institutions are insulated from citizens but accessible to rulers, democracy survives procedurally while shrinking substantively.

The broader implication extends beyond Nigeria. Many electoral democracies retain coercive institutions whose internal cultures were built under authoritarian or colonial conditions. The Nigerian case shows that democratization of office is incomplete without democratization of coercion. Until the agencies that carry guns, collect intelligence, manage crowds and enforce public order are made answerable to law and citizens, democratic transition remains vulnerable to authoritarian practice inside democratic form.

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