

The Social Contract under Strain: A Hobbesian Analysis of Governance and Insecurity in Nigeria

VITALIS ODINAKA UGWUKWU PhD

Abstract

The primary goal of this study was to determine whether the Nigerian government continues to uphold its "contract" with its people or whether the pervasive insecurity indicates a breakdown in legitimacy and authority. Thus, using the political theory of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and his notion of the social contract, the study investigates the ongoing problem of insecurity in Nigeria through a Hobbesian lens. Hobbes' argument revolves around the idea that people give up some liberties to a sovereign authority in return for security, law and order. The Nigerian experience, however, calls into doubt the sustainability of this agreement in the face of pervasive violence, such as banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, and inter-communal strife. This study examines whether the Nigerian government has fulfilled its basic duty to ensure the security of its people or whether the ongoing insecurity is an indication that the government's legitimacy is in question. The study investigates the degree to which citizens' trust in the state has declined, resulting in the emergence of self-help mechanisms and non-state security actors, through a qualitative analysis of existing literature, policy papers, and security reports. It also examines how the state's inability to operate as a Hobbesian Leviathan is caused by deficiencies in governance, corruption, and institutional weakness. The paper therefore, makes the case that a strained social contract is reflected in the widening divide between the state and its people, which has consequences for both national unity and political stability. In the end, it recommends a reassessment of security strategies and governance frameworks in order to rebuild public trust and reiterate the state's fundamental responsibility as the guarantor of peace and security.

Keywords: Social Contract, Insecurity, State Legitimacy, Governance, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Insecurity has presently become widespread in Nigeria, which poses serious risks to the country's progress, political stability, and social cohesiveness. Violent crimes like terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, banditry, insurgency, and communal disputes have steadily increased throughout the nation in the past few decades. Nigeria's insecurity crisis has assumed diverse regional dimensions, including armed banditry and mass kidnappings in the North-West and North-Central, insurgency and terrorism in the North-East, cult-related violence and kidnappings in the South-West, militancy and oil-related crimes in the South-South, and separatist-linked violence in the South-East involving groups such as IPOB, ESN, and "unknown gunmen".¹ Beyond the resulting deaths, displacement, and economic disruption, these security challenges have exposed weaknesses in Nigeria's legal and institutional frameworks, undermined public confidence in state institutions, and intensified concerns regarding the capacity of criminal justice and security agencies to effectively maintain law and order.²

¹ Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Terrorism Index. *Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace. Official Report Page. See also, International Crisis Group. Stopping Nigeria's Spiraling Banditry Crisis (International Crisis Group Report, 2023). O. Rasidi & A. Austin. Sovereignty under Siege: State Response, Fragility and the Political Ecology of Banditry in Sokoto, Nigeria. (2026) *Small Wars & Insurgencies*.

² MO. Biola & O. Atu. *Security Challenges and National Development in Nigeria*. *Journal of Administrative Science* (2024) .@

The persistence of insecurity across Nigeria raises fundamental concerns about the constitutional and legal obligations of the state to protect lives, property, and public order. Under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), the security and welfare of the people constitute the primary purpose of government, thereby placing a legal and institutional responsibility on the state to ensure effective security governance and the protection of citizens. The inability of state institutions and security agencies to adequately respond to terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, militancy, and separatist violence has therefore generated growing concerns regarding the effectiveness, legitimacy, and accountability of the Nigerian state. This concern may be further understood through the analytical lens of Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory in *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued that individuals surrender certain freedoms to the state in exchange for protection and the maintenance of order, making security the foundational basis of political authority and governmental legitimacy.³ His depiction of life without effective authority as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” underscores the necessity of a state capable of enforcing law and guaranteeing security. From this perspective, persistent insecurity reflects not only a security failure

<https://journal.uitm.edu.my/ojs/index.php/JAS/article/view/2581> accessed 10 February 2026; BH Odalonu. Worsening Insecurity in Nigeria and its Implications on Governance and National Development. *African Journal of Humanities and Contemporary Educational Research*. (2022) 5 (1) :31-49

³ T. Hobbes. *Leviathan* (R. Tuck Ed.) Cambridge University Press. 1996 (original work published in 1651)

but also a weakening of the state's constitutional and social contract obligations. Scholars such as Ake⁴, Ukiwo⁵, and Rasidi and Austin⁶ contend that when the state fails to fulfill its core responsibility of safeguarding citizens, public confidence in governmental institutions erodes, thereby threatening state legitimacy and the broader foundations of democratic governance.

In addition, structural challenges such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, weak institutional capacity, and ethno-religious tensions continue to intensify insecurity in Nigeria.⁷ Beyond constituting socio-economic or governance problems, these conditions have significant legal and constitutional implications because they undermine the capacity of the state to fulfill its constitutionally mandated responsibility of ensuring the security and welfare of citizens under section 14(2)(b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN).⁸ Persistent institutional weakness, ineffective law enforcement, and inadequate criminal justice responses further weaken the authority of the state and impair its ability to guarantee equal protection of the law and public safety. The

⁴ C. Ake. *Democracy and Development in Africa*. Spectrum Books

⁵ U. Ukiwo. *Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria African Development* (2019) 44 (3): 1-20

⁶ O. Rashidi & A. Austin. A. (2026). *Supra* at footnote No. 1

⁷ FC. Onuoha. *COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis. Conflict Trends*. (2020) (3) :17-23. See also, M. Nwankpa. *The Politics of Amnesty in Nigeria's Niger-Delta. Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. (2017) 35 (2): 244-262

⁸ section 14(2)(b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As amended)

increasing reliance on vigilante groups and other non-state security actors due to the perceived inadequacies of formal security agencies also raises serious constitutional concerns regarding the erosion of the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force, which is central to state sovereignty and constitutional order. While such groups often emerge as community-based responses to insecurity, their activities frequently operate outside formal legal frameworks, thereby creating challenges of accountability, human rights compliance, and lawful enforcement authority.⁹ In legal and constitutional terms, this development reflects not merely a policy or governance failure, but a weakening of the institutional authority through which the state exercises its constitutional functions and maintains public order.

Viewed through the Hobbesian social contract framework, the inability of the state to effectively secure lives and property suggest a gradual erosion of the foundational obligation upon which political authority and state legitimacy are built. Hobbes maintained that the legitimacy of the state depends primarily on its capacity to prevent disorder and guarantee collective security.¹⁰ Consequently, where insecurity persists despite the existence of constitutional institutions and coercive apparatuses, questions arise concerning the effectiveness of the state in discharging its legal obligations to citizens. It is within

⁹ International Crisis Group. Stopping Nigeria's Spiraling Banditry Crisis (International Crisis Group Report, 2023 *supra* footnote 1.

¹⁰ T. Hobbes. *Leviathan* (R. Tuck Ed.) 1996 *Supra*. Footnote 3.

this context that this study examines insecurity in Nigeria as not only a governance crisis, but also a constitutional and institutional challenge with profound implications for state legitimacy, rule of law, state-society relations, and national stability. Nigeria's persistent insecurity poses serious constitutional and legal issues pertaining to the state's accountability, legitimacy, and duty. The Nigerian state is primarily responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of its population, according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended). "The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government," according to Section 14(2)(b).¹¹ This constitutional clause makes security a fundamental legal obligation of the state as well as a political goal. Thus, the continued existence of terrorism, banditry, abduction, insurgency, communal violence, and other organized crime indicates serious institutional shortcomings in the execution of this constitutional duty.¹²

From a constitutional perspective, prolonged insecurity weakens the authority and legitimacy of governmental institutions responsible for maintaining law and order. State legitimacy in democratic systems is closely connected to the capacity of the government to enforce laws,

¹¹ Section 14 (2) (b) Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (As amended)

¹² BO. Nwabueze. *Constitutional Democracy in Africa*. Spectrum Books Limited. See also, ER. Aiyede. *Theories of Governance and Public Administration in Nigeria*. University of Ibadan Press.

protect fundamental rights, and maintain territorial control.¹³ Public trust in legal institutions like the police, military, and judiciary steadily erodes when the state is unable to adequately protect people and property.¹⁴ The state's monopoly on the lawful use of force and constitutional order may be undermined by citizens turning to vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and other non-state security arrangements for protection as a result of this erosion of confidence.¹⁵

The rule of law and the defense of rights protected by the constitution are also significantly impacted by persistent instability. Chapter IV of the Constitution protects fundamental rights such as the right to life, human dignity, freedom of movement, and freedom of association. However, persistent violent conflict and criminality often result in widespread violations of these rights through unlawful killings, kidnappings, forced displacement, destruction of property, and restrictions on movement.¹⁶

Concerns about governmental accountability and constitutional compliance surface when the state is unable to stop such infractions

¹³ M. Weber. *Economy and Society* 1978. University of California Press. (Original work published 1946)

¹⁴ FC. Onuoha. COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis (2020) supra at footnote 7

¹⁵ International Crisis Group. Supra footnote 1

¹⁶ CA, Odinkalu. (2021, September 3). *Nigerian law protects right to self-defence: Communities have duty to exercise it.* *Vanguard News*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/09/nigerian-law-protects-right-to-self-defence-communities-have-duty-to-exercise-it/> (Vanguard News). Accessed 6th April, 2026

or offer adequate remedies. According to Kelsen's theory of legal order, the ability of a state's institutions and legal system to control social behavior has a significant impact on the legitimacy of that authority.¹⁷ Thus, prolonged insecurity may indicate a decline in the normative authority of the legal system itself as well as a breakdown in public order.

Extraordinary security measures, such as military deployments, emergency rules, curfews, and greater monitoring authorities, are often required when there is persistent insecurity. Although such actions might be justified on the basis of national security, they nevertheless put civil freedoms and collective security at odds.¹⁸ Discussions concerning constitutionalism, human rights, and the boundaries of state coercive authority have arisen in Nigeria as a result of claims of arbitrary arrests, illegal detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings by security agents during counterinsurgency and anti-crime operations.¹⁹ Therefore, by depicting the state as a cause of insecurity rather than a source of protection, excessive or illegal use of force by security agencies may further erode governmental legitimacy.

¹⁷ H. Kelsen. *Pure theory of law* (M. Knight, Trans.). University of California Press. 1967. (Original work published 1960)

¹⁸ EEO. Alemika. *Security challenges and governance in Nigeria*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. (2013). <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/10379.pdf>

¹⁹ (Human Rights Watch, 2022) please supply reference. Human Rights Watch. (2022). *World report 2022: Nigeria*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/nigeria>.

The constitutional implications of insecurity are also closely tied to federalism and intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. Although security administration is constitutionally centralized under the Exclusive Legislative List, growing insecurity has intensified demands for state policing and decentralized security governance.²⁰

Critics argue that the inability of centrally controlled security institutions to effectively respond to local security threats demonstrates structural weaknesses within Nigeria's constitutional framework. Consequently, debates surrounding constitutional restructuring, state police, and community policing have become increasingly prominent within legal and political discourse.²¹

The moral and political underpinnings of state power are threatened by persistent insecurity, according to social contract theory. Thomas Hobbes maintained that in return for safety and social order, people give up some liberties to the government.²² The reciprocal duties that underpin the social contract are undermined when the state continuously fails to provide security. According to scholars like Ake²³, Ukiwo,²⁴ and Nwankpa²⁵, Nigeria's protracted insecurity is a

²⁰ R Suberu, De-centralization in Nigeria, 1954–2020. (2022). *Regional & Federal Studies*, 33(5), 699–724. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2134350>

²¹ OE. Akinyemi. Community Policing in Nigeria: Implications for National Peace and Security. *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies*. (2021) 4(3), 176–184.

²² T. Hobbes. *Leviathan* (R. Tuck Ed.) 1996 Supra. Footnote 3

²³ Supra footnote 4

²⁴ Supra footnote 5

²⁵ Supra footnote 7

sign of a crisis of state legitimacy because people are beginning to believe that the government is unable to carry out its basic duties. In this sense, the Nigerian state's legal authority, credibility, and sovereignty are all impacted by insecurity, which goes beyond simple governance failures and becomes a constitutional concern.

Ultimately, the persistence of insecurity has significant implications for democratic governance, constitutional stability, and national cohesion. It undermines public trust in institutions, weakens adherence to the rule of law, disrupts economic and social development, and threatens the legitimacy upon which constitutional government depends. The Nigerian state's response to insecurity must therefore extend beyond military or policy interventions to include institutional reforms, strengthened rule of law mechanisms, enhanced accountability, and effective constitutional governance capable of restoring public confidence in state authority.

2. Literature Review

2.1. About Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

One of the most important political philosophers of the early modern era, Thomas Hobbes is recognized for having laid the groundwork for contemporary political theory. He was born in England in 1588, when the Spanish Armada posed a threat; and later connected this event to fear, a notion that would eventually play a major role in his

philosophy²⁶ Hobbes' perspectives on human nature, authority, and the need for political order were significantly influenced by the English Civil War (1642–1651), one of the most violent eras in English history.²⁷ His groundbreaking book *Leviathan*, first published in 1651, is his most famous work. He offers a methodical explanation of human nature and political power in this work that is based on a materialist and mechanistic viewpoint. According to Hobbes, humans are essentially motivated by appetites and aversions, especially the need for self-preservation and the quest for power after power. He claimed that people are fundamentally self-interested, competitive, and driven by a dread of death and a desire for security, in contrast to traditional Aristotelian beliefs that humans are social beings.²⁸

The idea of the "state of nature," a hypothetical world without established law or political power, is fundamental to Hobbes' political philosophy. He argued that there is an ongoing state of conflict in such a state, which he famously referred to as a "war of every man against every man" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*).²⁹ Life becomes "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" in this anarchic state because people are continuously in danger from insecurity and violence.

²⁶ AP. Martinich. *Hobbes Biography*. (1997). Cambridge University Press

²⁷ Q. Skinner. *Visions of Politics: Volume III: Hobbes and Civil Science*. (2002). Cambridge University Press.

²⁸ D. Gauthier. *The Logic of Leviathan: The Moral and Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. (1969). Oxford University Press.

²⁹ T. Hobbes, *supra*.

Hobbes differs from later social contract theorists like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had more hopeful views on human sociability and moral potential.³⁰ Hobbes advocated the concept of a social contract as a means of escaping the turmoil of the natural state. This idea holds that in exchange for security and order from a sovereign power, rational people collectively consent to give up some natural rights, particularly the unrestricted freedom to act.³¹ To successfully uphold peace and avert a return to anarchy, this sovereign, which Hobbes figuratively referred to as the "Leviathan", must have ultimate and undivided power.³² Hobbes argued that any weakening of sovereign authority could result in instability and civil war, in contrast to later philosophers who supported limited government and the freedom to rebellion.³³

Hobbes' key ideas can be summarized as follows:

- Human Nature: Humans are naturally equal in vulnerability but driven by competition, diffidence (fear), and the desire for glory
- State of Nature: In the absence of political authority, society degenerates into violent disorder and insecurity.

³⁰ J. Locke *Two Treatise of Government*. (P. Laslett. Ed) Cambridge University Press. (Original work published in 1689). See also, J. Rosseau. *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. (V. Gourevitch Ed) (1997) Cambridge University Press (Original work published 1762)

³¹ T. Hobbes. *Leviathan* (R. Tuck Ed.) 1996 supra @ footnote 3

³² CB Macpherson. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. (1962). Oxford University Press.

³³ Q. Skinner. (2002) supra footnote 23

- Social Contract: Individuals consent to the establishment of a sovereign authority to guarantee peace and security.
- Absolute Sovereignty: A strong, centralized, and indivisible government is necessary to enforce laws and maintain social order.

Hobbes' writings established the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary political philosophy, especially the notion of political duty and the theory of the state. His theories had a big impact on later philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who reinterpreted the social contract in terms of popular sovereignty and the collective will, and John Locke, who changed it to emphasize natural rights and limited government.³⁴ Beyond philosophy, Hobbes' focus on security as the state's principal duty continues to influence discussions about governance, state legitimacy, and security today, especially in environments marked by ongoing instability and security challenges..

2.2. Conceptualizing Insecurity in Nigeria

Insecurity in Nigeria has been widely conceptualized as a condition in which individuals and communities are exposed to threats to life, property, and well-being, alongside the inability of the state to provide effective protection³⁵ This definition aligns with broader human security perspectives, which extend beyond military threats to

³⁴ T. Sorell. *Hobbes*. (1996). Routledge.

³⁵ IC. Achumba, OS. Ighomereho, MOM Akpor-Robaro. Security Challenges in Nigeria and the Implications for Business Activities and Sustainable Development. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development* (2013) (4) (2): 79-99

include economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.³⁶ Scholars emphasize that insecurity in Nigeria is not merely episodic but systemic, reflecting deep structural weaknesses within the state.³⁷

Nigerian insecurity takes many different forms. Through bombings, mass murders, and kidnappings, the northeastern region has been devastated by the insurgency led by Boko Haram and its breakaway group, Islamic State West Africa Province.³⁸ Banditry and kidnapping for ransom have become common in the northwest and north-central regions, affecting both rural and urban elites.³⁹ In the meantime, the north central states continue to see ongoing farmer-herder conflicts motivated by land shortages, climate change, and ethnic tensions, while the Niger Delta has seen militancy associated with resource control fights⁴⁰ These overlapping crises highlight the shortcomings of limited, state-centric security strategies and demonstrate the complexity of Nigeria's security environment.

³⁶ UNDP. (1994). *Human Development Report* (1994). Oxford University Press.

³⁷ CI. Nwagboso. *Security Challenges and Economy of the Nigerian State*. American International Journal of Contemporary Research. (2012) (2): (6): 244-262

³⁸ FC. Onuoha COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis (2020). Supra footnote 7

³⁹ International Crisis Group, supra footnote 1

⁴⁰ AC. Okoli, GA Atelhe. Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*. (2014) 4: (2) :76-88

2.3. The Hobbesian State and Security in Nigeria

One of the most important frameworks for comprehending the connection between security and the state is Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory. Hobbes contends in his landmark book, *Leviathan*, that fear, rivalry, and the need to survive are what motivate people in a pre-political "state of nature." People logically consent to give up certain natural rights to a sovereign power in exchange for the protection of their lives and property in order to escape this condition of perpetual insecurity⁴¹ Protection therefore becomes the principal justification for political authority, as the state derives its legitimacy fundamentally from its capacity to guarantee security and social order. From this Hobbesian perspective, the state's legitimacy is inextricably linked to how well it protects its inhabitants from outside dangers, violence, and chaos. The social compact is strengthened and citizens' obedience and loyalty are ensured when the state is successful in safeguarding lives and property. On the other hand, ongoing violence, instability, and the incapacity to ensure public safety erode the political and moral underpinnings of state power, eroding the social contract itself.⁴² This viewpoint has been extensively used in recent research on fragile and conflict-prone

⁴¹ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (R. Tuck Ed.) 1996 supra @ footnote 3

⁴² D Gauthier. *The Logic of Leviathan: The Moral and Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (1969) supra footnote 24

governments, where insecurity is frequently seen as proof of institutional weakness and poor governance.⁴³

Importantly, the legal and constitutional duties of contemporary governments reflect this Hobbesian understanding of governmental accountability. The protection of life and property is a legally recognized obligation of government in modern constitutional democracies, not only a philosophical expectation. For example, "the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government" is stated clearly in Section 14(2)(b) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 Constitution. The Nigerian government and its security agencies are directly required by this constitutional article to uphold law and order, guarantee public safety, and shield the populace from dangers including terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and intercommunal conflict. In a similar vein, constitutional systems all over the world entrust the state with protecting citizens' fundamental rights, especially the rights to life, liberty, property, and dignity.

Therefore, in addition to being an example of administrative inefficiency, the state's inability to effectively handle widespread insecurity is a violation of the social and constitutional duties that underpin state legitimacy. The prevalence of terrorism, banditry, insurgency, and other violent crimes in Nigeria raises serious

⁴³ SO. Abang. Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern States. *Wukari International Studies Journal*. (2026) (6) (1) 1-20

concerns about the state's capacity to uphold both its constitutional mandate to protect citizens' lives and property and its Hobbesian social contract obligations. According to Onuoha and the International Crisis Group⁴⁴, the development of violent threats, including as insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and communal disputes, indicates that the Nigerian state confronts substantial difficulties in carrying out its fundamental duty of protecting its inhabitants. From a Hobbesian perspective, these circumstances mirror a partial return to the natural state, in which people increasingly turn to self-help techniques in order to survive and dread and uncertainty rule social interactions. Decrying institutional failures and how terrible corruption have not only weakened the justice system but the entire fabrics of Nigeria with far reaching implications on security, a former Attorney General and Minister of Justice posit inter alia:

*“As Attorney General, people looked up to me for justice. They soon found that I was in no position to dispense justice. All I could do, for those who were willing to accept it, was teach them how to cope with injustice ...”*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Footnote 14 and footnote 1 respectively

⁴⁵ KG. Agbabi. Nigeria Against Corruption. (Pre-convocation Lecture) 15th Convocation Ceremony of the National Open University of Nigeria. Abuja Nigeria.

Agabi confirms the position of earlier scholars like Ake⁴⁶ and Nwagboso⁴⁷, who contend that corruption, a weak rule of law, and a lack of governmental capacity are some of the underlying structural and institutional flaws that underlie Nigeria's instability. These elements degrade public confidence in the government and compromise the efficacy of security institutions, which weakens the social contract. Accordingly, Max Weber's idea that the state is the only body with the right to employ force becomes pertinent. In Nigeria, the rise of vigilante organizations, regional security groups, and non-state armed actors suggests a breakup of this monopoly and a crisis of state power.⁴⁸

The Hobbesian claim that security is essential to state legitimacy is supported by empirical research. Rotberg asserts that the incapacity of government institutions to offer individuals sufficient protection is one of the most obvious signs of state failure.⁴⁹ Such a failure shows a breakdown in the state's basic constitutional duty to safeguard life, property, and public order, in addition to being a sign of poor governance. In a similar vein, current African study contends that ongoing insecurity undermines state institutions, interferes with economic activity, erodes public trust in the government, and

⁴⁶ C. Ake, *Democracy and development in Africa* (2001) Supra @ footnote 4

⁴⁷ CI Nwagboso. *Security Challenges and Economy of the Nigerian State*. supra at footnote 33

⁴⁸ U. Ukiwo, *Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria*. (2019) supra @ footnote 5

⁴⁹ RI. Rotberg. *When State Fail: Causes and Consequences*. (2004) Princeton University Press.

perpetuates violent cycles that are hard to break⁵⁰ These security lapses raise grave questions about how well the state is carrying out its legal duties under Section 14(2)(b) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 Constitution, which states that the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government, in constitutional democracies like Nigeria.

The state's continued reliance on militaristic responses without adequately tackling structural socioeconomic causes including poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and social exclusion has made Nigeria's security environment more complicated. While coercive measures may provide temporary containment of threats, the continued prevalence of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and communal conflicts suggests limitations in a security approach that neglects preventive governance and social justice mechanisms. Therefore, in addition to undermining the social compact, the state's incapacity to implement all-encompassing and citizen-centered security measures may also be seen as a failure of constitutional governance and public accountability. Restoring public trust therefore requires not only strengthening the coercive capacity of the state but also ensuring inclusive governance, institutional accountability, adherence to the rule of law, and effective implementation of

⁵⁰ SO. Abang. Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern (2026) *supra* @ 39 See also, MO. Biola & o. Atu. Security Challenges and National Development in Nigeria (2024) *supra* at footnote 2

constitutional duties relating to the protection of citizens and their property.

2.4. Insecurity in Nigeria: Trends and Patterns

Recent scholarship shows that insecurity in Nigeria has evolved into a complex, geographically diffused phenomenon affecting all six geopolitical zones, though with varying intensity and manifestations.⁵¹ The major forms of insecurity include insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, separatist violence, and urban criminality, all of which collectively undermine governance, economic stability, and social cohesion.⁵²

Insecurity is no longer limited to northern Nigeria, according to empirical data from official statistics and media accounts. Rather, it has extended to the South East and South West, confirming what scholars refer to as the "nationalization of insecurity".⁵³

2.4.1. Regional Patterns of Insecurity in Nigeria:

North East: Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa Province continue to be the principal forces behind the conflict in the northeast.

⁵¹ O. Rasidi. & A. Austin. Sovereignty under Siege: State Response, Fragility and the Political Ecology of Banditry in Sokoto, Nigeria. Supra @ footnote 1

⁵² BH Odalonu. Worsening Insecurity in Nigeria and its Implications on Governance and National Development. *African Journal of Humanities and Contemporary Education Research*. (2022) (5) (1): 31-49

⁵³ International Crisis Group supra @ footnote 1

Millions of residents are still affected by bombs, ambushes, kidnappings, and displacement crises in the area.⁵⁴

North West: Armed banditry, which includes hamlet attacks, cattle rustling, and mass kidnappings, dominates the North West. Over 60% of all kidnapping instances occur in states like Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Sokoto.⁵⁵

North Central : Ethnic tensions, land scarcity, and climate stress are the main causes of the ongoing farmer-herder clashes in this region, especially in the states of Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa.⁵⁶ Retaliatory violence and recurring cycles of displacement have emerged from these disputes.

South West: The generally stable South West has seen an increase in highway attacks, cult-related violence, armed robberies, and kidnappings. Abductions along major highways, like the Lagos–Ibadan and Benin–Ore expressways, are becoming more common in Lagos, Ogun, and Ondo States.⁵⁷ In response to mounting urban

⁵⁴ FC. Onuoha. COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis (2020) supra @ footnote 7

⁵⁵ National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). (2024). *Crime experience and security perception survey*.

⁵⁶ AC. Okoli & GA Atelhe. Farmer–Herder Conflicts in Nigeria (2014). Supra @ footnote 36

⁵⁷ Punch. Newspaper (2024). Kidnapping trends in Nigeria. *Punch Newspapers*. (2024, June 29). *Kidnapping spree: Police upgrade tracking system as 1,290 abducted in 2024*. <https://punchng.com/kidnapping-sprees-police-upgrade-tracking-system-as-1290-abducted-in-2024/>

insecurity concerns, urban criminal gangs and cult networks have also extended their operations into urban areas, especially Lagos⁵⁸

South East: Separatist violence, armed attacks, and criminal activity associated with organizations like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), are currently plaguing the South East. Despite IPOB's denial of direct involvement in violence, attacks on police formations, election infrastructure, and penal facilities have occurred in a number of states, including Imo, Anambra, and Enugu.⁵⁹ Furthermore, attacks by "unknown gunmen" have emerged as a persistent security risk, causing anxiety and interruption to the economy.

South South: Kidnappings, pipeline damage, oil theft, and militancy-related violence are still prevalent in the South South, especially in Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa States. Criminal networks have evolved into sophisticated oil theft and abduction syndicates, despite the Amnesty Program's reduction of large-scale militancy.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ SO. Abang. Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern State. *Supra* at footnote 39

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group 2023. *Supra* at footnote 1

⁶⁰ Nwankpa. The Politics of Amnesty in Nigeria's Niger Delta (2017) *Supra* @

Table 1: National Overview of Insecurity Patterns by Region (2023–2025)

Region	Dominant Security Threat	Key Characteristics
North East	Insurgency	Bombings, abductions, displacement
North West	Banditry	Mass kidnappings, rural attacks
North Central	Communal conflicts	Farmer–herder violence
South West	Urban crime & kidnapping	Highway abductions, cult violence
South East	Separatist violence & “unknown gunmen”	Attacks on security agencies, disruptions
South South	Militancy & oil theft	Pipeline vandalism, kidnapping

Source: Author’s synthesis based on reviewed literature

Table 2: Selected National Security Statistics (2023–2025)

Indicator	Figures	Source
Kidnap victims (2023–2024)	2.23 million	NBS (2024)
Total ransom paid	₦2.2 trillion	NBS (2024)
Abductions recorded	7,568 cases	SBM Intelligence (2024)
Kidnapping incidents (2024–2025)	4,722 cases	SBM Intelligence (2025)
Killings (April 2025)	570 deaths	NHRC (2025)
Schoolchildren abducted	670 cases	Daily Trust (2024)

Tables 1 and 2 reveal four major patterns:

1. Geographical diffusion of insecurity: Insecurity has shifted from a northern phenomenon to a nationwide crisis affecting all geopolitical zones;
2. Diversification of threats: While insurgency dominates the North East, other regions face hybrid threats such as kidnapping economies, cult violence, separatist militancy, and urban criminal networks.⁶¹
3. Economic criminalization of insecurity: With ransom payments hitting trillions of Naira, kidnapping has become a major illegal industry.⁶²
4. Weak state capacity and fragmented security governance: The spread of insecurity into the South West and South East reflects limitations in policing capacity, intelligence coordination, and state monopoly of force.⁶³

The literature and empirical data show that insecurity in Nigeria is now widespread throughout the country. Theoretically, this supports the Hobbesian claim that the social contract is severely undermined when the state is unable to maintain security within its borders, resulting in crises of legitimacy and a greater dependence on non-state security actors.

⁶¹ SO. Abang, *Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern State*. Supra at footnote 39

⁶² NBS 2024 supra at footnote 51

⁶³ U. Ukiwo, *Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria*. (2019) supra @ footnote 5

2.5. Governance and State Legitimacy

In political theory and empirical governance studies, state legitimacy is essentially based on the state's ability to provide public goods, among which security is the most important. The main justification for the state's existence in traditional social contract theory, especially in Thomas Hobbes' writings, is its capacity to avert the "war of all against all" by upholding law and order and safeguarding life and property.⁶⁴ In modern governance literature, this Hobbesian notion is strengthened by the argument that legitimacy is perpetuated when citizens regard the state as competent, responsive, and capable of providing collective security.⁶⁵

According to this theory, the supply of public goods, especially security, justice, and the rule of law, is directly related to governmental legitimacy. When these fundamental tasks are carried out successfully, people grow to trust governmental institutions and voluntarily submit to authority. On the other hand, legitimacy deteriorates when the state neglects its fundamental duty to safeguard people and property, which frequently results in what some authors refer to as a "governance vacuum"⁶⁶ The social contract between the government and the populace is weakened under such situations

⁶⁴ T. Hobbes. *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). 1996. Supra at footnote 3

⁶⁵ B. Rothstein, B. *The Quality of Government*. (2011) University of Chicago Press. See also, D. Bentham. *The Legitimacy of Power*. MacMillian

⁶⁶ So Abang, supra at footnote 19; R.I. Rotberg *When states fail: Causes and consequence*. (2004) supra footnote 45

because the state is seen as feeble, ineffectual, or even nonexistent in some areas. For example, in reaction to the "continued attacks by Boko Haram on military formations, the abduction of about 416 women, children and elderly persons reportedly held captive by insurgents in Borno State since March 30, 2026" and the inability of state actors to arrest the situation, The Nigerian Senate urged the Federal Government to consider far-reaching emergency measures, including the possible suspension of political activities in eight frontline states, as insecurity continues to escalate across parts of the country. According to Punch Newspaper of 23rd April, 2026 Sen. Abdul Ningi captured it as follows during plenary:

*"One of the things that we must do, and I want us to take this issue very seriously, is either to suspend all political activities across this country or look at the frontline states of Borno, Plateau, Bauchi, Benue, Niger, Sokoto, Kebbi and some parts of Kano... We need to suspend activities in these states until we are sufficiently certain that the insecurity challenges are over. "This is because we are not dealing with this insecurity issue at all..."*⁶⁷

The issue of legitimacy in Nigeria is becoming more closely associated with ongoing insecurity and dwindling trust in official institutions. According to empirical research, public trust has been severely damaged by the Nigerian government's incapacity to deal

⁶⁷ Punch Newspapers. (2026, April 23). *Insecurity: Senate seeks campaign suspension in eight northern states*. <https://punchng.com/insecurity-senate-seeks-campaign-suspension-in-eight-northern-states/> (punchng.com)

with insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence⁶⁸ The situation is especially noticeable in parts of the South East and South West, where growing crime and separatist tensions have further complicated governance, and in areas like the Northeast and Northwest, where non-state armed groups have successfully challenged state authority⁶⁹ Citizens frequently turn to alternative security arrangements, such as vigilante groups, community defense organizations, and unofficial protection networks, when the state is unable to provide sufficient security. These mechanisms may offer temporary respite, but they also threaten the state's historic monopoly on justifiable force.⁷⁰ This situation reflects what Rothstein refers to as "partial state failure," in which individuals choose non-state actors they believe to be more accessible or effective over formal institutions.⁷¹

The spread of these alternative security organizations in Nigeria serves as an example of how official authority is eroding. For instance, the perceived inability of the state to ensure safety has led to the emergence of regional security organizations like Amotekun in the

⁶⁸ BH Odalonu. Worsening Insecurity in Nigeria and its Implications on Governance and National Development Supra at footnote 48; Rasidi & Austin; supra at footnote

1

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group 2023 supra at footnote 1

⁷⁰ U. Ukiwo, *Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria*. (2019) supra @ footnote 5

⁷¹ B. Rothstein *The Quality of Government* (2011) supra at footnote 61

South West and several community vigilante groups in the North.⁷² Although these programs are frequently presented as an adjunct to official law enforcement, they also indicate the fragmentation of security control and a decline in institutional trust. Moreover, the loss of legitimacy is a problem for governance and development in addition to security. Weak legitimacy reduces the state's ability to generate resources for development by undermining civic engagement, political participation, and tax compliance.⁷³ Additionally, it gives rebel organizations and criminal networks a chance to increase their power, thus undermining political systems.⁷⁴

Therefore, the Nigerian experience demonstrates a cyclical relationship between legitimacy and insecurity: diminished legitimacy exacerbates insecurity by decreasing citizen-state institution cooperation, and insecurity weakens state legitimacy. knowledge the persistence of governance issues in fragile nations requires a knowledge of this cyclical cycle.

⁷² SO. Abang Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern States at footnote 19

⁷³ F. Fukuyama. *The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2011

⁷⁴ M. Nwankpa. *The Politics of Amnesty in Nigeria's Niger Delta* (2017). Supra @ footnote 17

Table 3: Governance Failure and Indicators of Weak State Legitimacy in Nigeria

Indicator of Governance	Manifestation in Nigeria	Implication for Legitimacy
Security provision failure	Insurgency, banditry, kidnapping	Erosion of trust in state
Monopoly of force weakened	Vigilantes, Amotekun, local militias	Fragmentation of authority
Rule of law deficits	Impunity for violent actors	Declining institutional trust
Public goods failure	Poverty, unemployment, displacement	Reduced compliance and cooperation

Source: Author's synthesis based on reviewed literature

Table 3 shows some key analytical insights:

1. Security as the core of legitimacy: The ability of the state to ensure physical security is the primary determinant of governance legitimacy in fragile states such as Nigeria⁷⁵;
2. Substitution of state authority: Vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and regional security organizations are examples of how people have adapted to perceived state failure⁷⁶
3. Erosion of the social contract: Persistent insecurity undermines the implicit agreement between citizens and the

⁷⁵ D. Beetham, (1991) *The Legitimation of Power* supra at footnote 61; SO. Abang at 39

⁷⁶ U. Ukiwo, *Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria*. (2019) supra @ footnote 5

state, echoing Hobbesian concerns about the breakdown of political order⁷⁷

4. Governance–security feedback loop: A self-reinforcing loop is created when poor governance leads to insecurity, which in turn erodes governance capacity.⁷⁸

2.6. Drivers and Dynamics of Insecurity in Nigeria

Numerous interconnected causes of insecurity in Nigeria are identified in the literature. Poverty and unemployment are important factors, especially for young people. High socioeconomic deprivation makes it easier for people to join extremist and criminal organizations.⁷⁹ Corruption and poor administration exacerbate this, eroding public confidence in governmental institutions and reducing the efficacy of security measures.⁸⁰

Ethno-religious divisions also play a significant role in fueling conflict. Nigeria's diverse population, while a source of cultural richness, has often been politicized, leading to identity-based violence. In addition, environmental factors such as desertification and climate change have intensified competition over land and water

⁷⁷ T. Hobbes *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). (1996 at footnote 3; Rothstein at footnote 61

⁷⁸ R.I. Rotberg. *When States Fail: Causes and consequences* (2004). Supra @ footnote 5. See Rasidi & Austin at footnote 1

⁷⁹ A. Oyefusi. Oil and the Probability of Rebel Participation among Youths in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. *Journal of Peace Research*. (2008) (45) (4): 539-555

⁸⁰ C. Ake *Democracy and development in Africa* (2001) supra at footnote 4

resources, particularly in the northern regions, thereby exacerbating farmer–herder conflicts.⁸¹

The spread of small arms and light weapons, which has made conflicts more deadly and given non-state actors the ability to oppose state authority, is another important factor.⁸² Because they make it easier for fighters and weapons to travel around the region, porous borders and transnational criminal networks further complicate the security environment.⁸³

2.7. State Responses and their Limitations

In order to combat insecurity, the Nigerian government has implemented a number of tactics, such as military operations, counter-terrorism campaigns, amnesty plans, and community policing projects. For instance, joint task forces and regional collaboration through the Multinational Joint Task Force have been key components of the government's militarized response to the Boko Haram insurgency.⁸⁴ Similar to this, amnesty initiatives in the Niger

⁸¹ AC. Okoli & GA Atelhe Farmer–Herder conflicts in Nigeria. *supra* @ footnote 36

⁸² FC Onuoha, COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis (2020) *supra* @ footnote 14

⁸³ International Crisis Group 2023 *supra* at footnote 1

⁸⁴ FC Onuoha. COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis, *Supra* at footnote 14

Delta have sought to lower militancy by offering former fighters financial rewards.⁸⁵

The efficacy of state interventions has been called into question notwithstanding these efforts. Scholars contend that an excessive dependence on military remedies ignores the underlying causes of insecurity, which include poverty, inequality, and deficiencies in governance.⁸⁶ Additionally, claims that security personnel have violated human rights have damaged public confidence and, in certain situations, made complaints worse.⁸⁷ The emergence of regional and community-based security initiatives, such as vigilante groups and local militias, reflects both the limitations of state responses and the adaptive strategies of communities seeking protection.⁸⁸ While these initiatives may provide short-term security, they also raise concerns about accountability, legality, and the potential for abuse.

2.8. Gaps in the Literature

There are still a number of gaps in the research that has been done on the causes and effects of insecurity in Nigeria. First, more theoretically based assessments that combine modern empirical facts with classical political theory like Hobbesian social contract theory are required. Second, there are few attempts to provide a thorough,

⁸⁵ M. Nwankpa (2017) *The Politics of Amnesty in Nigeria's Niger Delta* supra at footnote 5

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group 2023

⁸⁷ Amnesty International. (2022). *Nigeria: Human rights report*

⁸⁸ U. Ukiwo. *Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria*. (2019) Supra at footnote 5

national perspective, and the majority of the literature concentrates on particular areas or types of insecurity. Third, the long-term effects of insecurity on social cohesiveness and governmental legitimacy are not given enough consideration.

This study tries to fill these gaps by employing a Hobbesian framework to evaluate insecurity as a consequence of a weakened social contract in Nigeria. By doing so, it contributes to a greater understanding of the relationship between security, state legitimacy, and governance in contemporary Nigeria.

2.9. Theoretical Framework: Hobbesian Social Contract and the Problem of Insecurity in Nigeria

The theoretical underpinning of this study is based in the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes, as described in his seminal work *Leviathan*. Hobbes' paradigm provides a fascinating perspective for analyzing the connection between the state and citizens, particularly in circumstances where insecurity challenges the legitimacy and functionality of government structures. Hobbes' key thesis is that the primary aim of the state is the guarantee of security. In the imagined "state of nature," individuals exist in a condition of anarchy characterized by fear, competitiveness, and continual warfare. To escape this state, individuals logically consent to the creation of a sovereign authority, abandoning certain freedoms in exchange for

protection of life and property.⁸⁹ This mutual agreement constitutes the social contract, which forms the moral and political basis of governmental legitimacy.

Applying this concept to Nigeria, the existence of widespread insecurity raises fundamental issues regarding the extent to which the Nigerian state has fulfilled its Hobbesian role. The increased occurrence of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence implies that the state's capacity to provide security, (a basic part of the social contract) has been considerably reduced.⁹⁰ In Hobbesian terminology, when the sovereign fails to ensure protection, the underlying reason for political authority becomes weakened. Thus, Hobbes highlighted the indivisibility and absoluteness of sovereign power as crucial for sustaining order. However, in Nigeria, the proliferation of non-state armed actors, vigilante groups, and regional security outfits implies a fragmentation of power and a partial weakening of the state's monopoly on the lawful use of force. This development is suggestive of what may be termed as a "quasi-state of nature," as residents increasingly resort to self-help strategies for survival due to perceived or real shortcomings of formal security institutions.

⁸⁹ T. Hobbes *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). (1996) supra @ footnote 3. J. Hampton. *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*. (1986) Cambridge University Press

⁹⁰ FC. Onuoha. (2020) supra at footnote 14; International Crisis Group 2023 supra at footnote 1

Scholars have suggested that the deterioration of state capacity in Nigeria is intimately linked to structural difficulties such as corruption, inadequate institutional frameworks, poverty, and political instability.⁹¹ These characteristics not only limit efficient government but also exacerbate grievances that drive violent confrontations. From a Hobbesian perspective, such situations undercut the social contract by undermining the state's ability to execute laws and maintain order, hence encouraging uneasiness and distrust among residents. However, while Hobbes calls for ultimate sovereignty, detractors contend that uncontrolled state authority may lead to tyranny and abuse, which can potentially harm human security. This critique is evident in the works of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who advocated alternative interpretations of the social compact that emphasize limited government, individual liberties, and popular sovereignty.⁹² In the Nigerian context, this poses an important tension: while a powerful state is vital to provide security, it must also stay accountable and responsive to the needs of its inhabitants.

In essence, Hobbes' theory offers a good analytical tool for understanding insecurity in Nigeria as a manifestation of a broken social contract. The inability of the state to properly safeguard its population not only undermines its legitimacy but also generates

⁹¹ C. Ake. *Democracy and development in Africa*. (2001) supra at footnote 4; KG. Agabi. *Nigeria against corruption* [Pre-convocation lecture] supra at footnote 41

⁹² J. Locke. *Two Treatises of Government*. Supra 26; see also, JJ Rousseau. *The Social Contract and other Later Political Writings* (V. Gourevitch Ed.) footnote 26

conditions similar of the state of nature, when dread and uncertainty dominate social life. This study, therefore, leverages the Hobbesian framework to explore the link between insecurity, state failure, and governance, while also recognizing the necessity to balance state authority with democratic responsibility.

3. Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research design, focusing exclusively on secondary data sources. The data comprise of peer-reviewed journal articles, official government publications, policy briefings, and pertinent academic texts that investigate insecurity and state legitimacy in Nigeria. These sources were purposively picked based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the topic matter.

The study was undertaken using a thematic method, which entailed carefully locating, classifying, and interpreting reoccurring patterns, themes, and relationships within the literature. This strategy allows the study to synthesis multiple scholarly viewpoints and policy insights in order to better understand how insecurity effects state legitimacy and governance institutions in Nigeria.⁹³

⁹³ AO. Thaddaeus & AO. Albert. The Nexus of Banditry, Farmer-Herder Clashes, and Insecurity in Nigeria. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* (2025) (9) (5): 2083-2090.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Nature of Insecurity in Nigeria

The nature of insecurity in Nigeria is complex, dynamic, and geographically dispersed. Contemporary studies identify major manifestations such as terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, militancy, and separatist-related violence, all of which are interlinked and reinforced by structural governance deficits, economic deprivation, and weak security institutions.⁹⁴ (Rather than functioning as independent entities, these security risks interact across areas through criminal networks, weaponry proliferation, and similar socioeconomic factors.

Across the six geopolitical zones, insecurity presents distinct but overlapping patterns:

4.1.1 North East: Terrorism and Insurgency

The North East remains the core of insurgency led by Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province. The region has suffered mass massacres, suicide bombings, forced recruitment, and large-scale displacement, particularly in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States⁹⁵

⁹⁴ O. Rasidi & A. Austin Sovereignty under Siege: State Response, Fragility and the Political Ecology of Banditry in Sokoto. *supra* at footnote 1; BH Odalonu Worsening Insecurity in Nigeria and its Implications on Governance and National Development, *supra* at footnote 48

⁹⁵ FC. Onuoha. COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis; *supra*.

Despite military deployments, rebel fragmentation has perpetuated instability and humanitarian disasters.

4.1.2 North West: Banditry and Mass Kidnapping

The North West is characterized by armed banditry, cattle rustling, and mass abductions. States such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Sokoto have become centers for organized kidnapping-for-ransom economies. The scale of attacks on rural villages and roadways suggests a weakening of state presence and rural government systems.⁹⁶

4.1.3 North Central (Middle Belt): Communal and Farmer–Herder Violence

The North Central region has continuous community confrontations, mainly between farming populations and pastoralist herders. States such as Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa have experienced repeating cycles of retaliatory violence fueled by land scarcity, climate stress, and ethnic conflicts.⁹⁷ These conflicts typically result in mass relocation and food shortages.

4.1.4 South West: Urban Crime, Kidnapping, and Cult Violence

The South West, including Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, and Ekiti States, has witnessed a rise in urban criminality, highway kidnappings, armed

⁹⁶ NBS. (2024). *Crime experience and security perception survey*. National Bureau of Statistics.

⁹⁷ AC. Okoli & GA Atelhe. Farmer–Herder Conflicts in Nigeria (2014) *supra* at footnote 36

robbery, and cult-related violence. Strategic routes such as the Lagos–Ibadan and Benin–Ore expressways have become key kidnapping corridors.⁹⁸ Urban centers also confront increased gang-related violence and youth cult disputes.

4.1.5 South East: Separatist-Linked Violence and “Unknown Gunmen”

The South East is defined by separatist-related violence, attacks on security formations, and operations attributed to “unknown gunmen.” States such as Imo, Anambra, and Ebonyi have experienced frequent assaults on police stations, penal institutions, and election infrastructure.⁹⁹ These occurrences are generally linked—directly or indirectly—to tensions surrounding the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its claimed armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN).

4.1.6 South-South: Militancy, Oil Theft, and Kidnapping

The South East is defined by separatist-related violence, attacks on security formations, and operations attributed to “unknown gunmen.” States such as Imo, Anambra, and Ebonyi have experienced frequent assaults on police stations, penal institutions, and election infrastructure.¹⁰⁰ These occurrences are generally linked—directly or

⁹⁸ BusinessDay. (2024). Kidnapping trends in South West Nigeria.; BusinessDay. (2024). Rising kidnapping incidents in South West Nigeria

⁹⁹ International Crisis Group 2023 *supra*, footnote 1

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

indirectly—to tensions surrounding the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its claimed armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN).

4.2. Causes of Insecurity in Nigeria

The chronic insecurity in Nigeria is fueled by a complex combination of structural, institutional, and socioeconomic variables. Key reasons cited in the literature include weak governmental institutions, widespread poverty, high unemployment, systemic corruption, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.¹⁰¹ These elements combined diminish the power of the state to maintain law and order, enforce rules, and safeguard residents across its territory.

Inadequate institutional capacity is still a major problem, especially in the fields of criminal justice administration, policing, and intelligence collecting. The effectiveness of security services in preventing and responding to threats is diminished by their frequent underfunding, poor coordination, and perceived lack of responsibility.¹⁰² Criminal and insurgent organizations frequently take advantage of the governance gaps created by this institutional weakness.

Insecurity is made worse by poverty and unemployment, which make a large portion of the population, especially young people, more susceptible to being recruited into violent and illegal activities.

¹⁰¹ BH. Odalonu. *supra* at footnote 48

¹⁰² C. Ake *Democracy and Development in Africa* (2001) *supra* at footnote 4; Rotberg (2004) at footnote 5

According to Onuoha¹⁰³ and Nwagboso¹⁰⁴ economic deprivation diminishes opportunity structures and increases frustration, which can lead to criminal activity or involvement in armed groups. In rural and peri-urban areas with little governmental presence, this dynamic is most noticeable.

Additionally, corruption is a major factor in compromising security results. Patronage-based governance, misallocation of public funds, and diversion of security expenditures all diminish the efficacy of security institutions and undermine public confidence in the government¹⁰⁵ In these situations, the state's legitimacy is weakened because citizens believe it is unable or unwilling to defend them.¹⁰⁶ The spread of small arms and light weapons throughout the nation is another important factor. The lethality and frequency of violent episodes have increased due to the extensive availability of weapons among non-state actors, which has been facilitated by porous borders, lax arms control measures, and transnational trafficking networks.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ FC. Onuoha. COVID-19 Pandemic and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Double Crisis supra at footnote 7

¹⁰⁴ . Nwagboso. *Security Challenges and Economy of the Nigerian State* supra at footnote 33

¹⁰⁵ SO Abang Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern States (2026) supra @ footnote 19; KG Agabi *Nigeria Against Corruption* (Pre-Convocation Lecture) (2026) supra @ footnote 44

¹⁰⁶ International Crisis Group, supra @ footnote 1

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

When combined, these elements produce a vicious cycle of insecurity whereby poor governance feeds socioeconomic hardship, which intensifies violence and further erodes official authority. This supports the more general claim that systemic governance failure in Nigeria is both a cause and an effect of insecurity.

4.3. Erosion of the Social Contract

The fundamental connection between the state and its population, especially the implicit social contract that ensures safety in exchange for submission to official authority, has been severely damaged by Nigeria's ongoing insecurity. According to classical political theory, particularly in Thomas Hobbes' writings, the state's legitimacy rests on its capacity to provide security and avert a return to the "state of nature," which is characterized by violence and terror.¹⁰⁸ Public trust in the state is maintained when citizens believe that government institutions can provide security and justice, according to contemporary governance literature. However, empirical research shows that public trust in Nigerian state institutions has steadily declined as a result of growing insecurity.¹⁰⁹ Citizens' faith in the state's ability to protect them has been undermined by security agencies' pervasive incapacity to successfully prevent or respond to dangers including kidnapping, banditry, insurgency, and communal

¹⁰⁸ T. Hobbes. *Leviathan* (1996) Supra at footnote 3

¹⁰⁹ SO. Abang. (2026) Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern States, supra @ footnote 39

violence. In rural and sub-urban areas, where there is little state presence and a tendency for emergency responses to be delayed, this fall in trust is more noticeable.¹¹⁰

As a result, people are turning more and more to alternative protection measures including private security firms, community defense groups, and vigilante groups. These mechanisms indicate a deeper institutional crisis where the state is seen as either nonexistent or ineffectual, even if they frequently arise as practical reactions to acute dangers.¹¹¹ As citizens progressively shift their expectations of safety from the state to non-state actors, the growth of such self-help security organizations indicates a partial breakdown of the social contract. The authority and cohesiveness of the state are significantly impacted by this development. According to Weberian theory, the state's monopoly on the lawful use of force is challenged by the rise of rival security providers, undermining its sovereignty.¹¹² According to Hobbes, it signifies a shift toward a fractured "state of nature," in which people are forced to ensure their own existence in the absence of efficient centralized security.

¹¹⁰ BH. Oдалonu Worsening Insecurity in Nigeria and its Implications on Governance and National Development *supra* at footnote 48.

¹¹¹ AI. Rufus & EB. Ogbe. The Rise of Banditry in Northwest Nigeria: Examining the Security Implications and Pathways to Stability. *Kashere Law Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2024) (3) (1) 22-35; see also, U. Ukiwo. Violent Conflict and the State in Nigeria. (2019) *Supra* at footnote 19

¹¹² T. Hobbes. *supra* at footnote 3

In general, Nigeria's deteriorating social contract is a reflection of both a deeper crisis of legitimacy and a security failure. It emphasizes how insecurity and governance are mutually reinforcing: when insecurity rises, people lose faith in the government, which further erodes the state's power and creates a vicious cycle of instability.

4.4. Implications for State Legitimacy

State legitimacy has significant and complex ramifications when it comes to the deterioration of the social contract. Declining public trust, weaker national cohesiveness, and economic instability are important results of this trend, as the reviewed research highlights.¹¹³

The public's opinion that the government is no longer carrying out its fundamental duty to provide security, justice, and welfare is reflected in the loss in public trust in state institutions. This is consistent with the more general social contract theory, which maintains that legitimacy is only maintained when the state successfully defends the rights and welfare of its inhabitants.

The danger to national cohesion is another significant consequence. Loyalty to national institutions wanes when people lose faith in the government, which frequently results in division along political, ethnic, or regional lines. In these situations, conflicting sources of

¹¹³ VU. Ijirshar. et al. Effect of Insecurity on Agricultural Output in Nigeria. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*. (2025) (9): (5) <https://journals.fukashere.edu.ng/index.php/kjpir/article/view/399> accessed 15 February 2026

power arise, weakening the state's integrative function and widening societal divides.

Economic activity and growth processes are disrupted by the erosion of legitimacy. As insecurity, demonstrations, capital flight, and diminished investor confidence increase, the state's ability to function is increasingly undermined and cycles of instability are strengthened. The rise of non-state or parallel authority, such as vigilante groups, community self-help organizations, or unofficial security arrangements, is closely related. Although the growth of these actors indicates a decline of state sovereignty and territorial authority, they frequently fill governance gaps created by the state.¹¹⁴ Alternative power structures that rival the state may eventually become institutionalized as a result of this division of authority.

Overall, research indicates that the breakdown of the social contract creates a vicious cycle: diminishing legitimacy reduces state capacity, which exacerbates insecurity and speeds up the rise of competing authorities, undermining long-term stability and the efficacy of governance.

¹¹⁴ O. Kugbayi & A. Adegbam. Patterns of Violent Conflict in Nigeria. *Journal of Conflict Studies*. (2024) (12): (2) :101-119

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that Nigeria is experiencing a deepening crisis of state legitimacy, primarily reflected in the government's persistent difficulty in fulfilling its core constitutional responsibility of guaranteeing security for lives and property.¹¹⁵ This situation is not merely a policy failure but signals a structural weakening of the social contract between the state and its citizens. When citizens consistently perceive the state as unable or unwilling to protect them, the moral and political authority of that state becomes increasingly contested, leading to reduced compliance, declining trust, and the gradual emergence of alternative sources of authority.

From the perspective of classical political theory, the Hobbesian understanding of the state of nature is highly compatible with this condition. Hobbes contends that society collapses into a state of instability where life becomes "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" in the absence of a powerful sovereign authority capable of upholding order. The growing reliance of people and communities in modern Nigeria on self-help security systems, such as vigilante groups, community watch networks, and private security companies, reflects this parallel. These trends suggest that the state has partially

¹¹⁵ O. Rasidi & A. Austin *Sovereignty under Siege: State Response, Fragility and the Political Ecology of Banditry in Sokoto*. *supra* @ (2026) footnote 6

relinquished its monopoly on coercive authority, which is more akin to a fragmented security environment than a single sovereign order.¹¹⁶

Additionally, the growth of rival power centers within the country and the decline of centralized official authority are demonstrated by the spread of non-state armed players, criminal networks, and localized protection groups. According to Kugbayi and Adegbayi, the existence of ungoverned or poorly governed areas has led to operational gaps that these players may easily fill. Alternative systems of control, such as bandit formations, insurgent groups, and unofficial security arrangements, thrive in these areas, which are frequently marked by a lack of law enforcement presence, poor institutional penetration, and socioeconomic distress.¹¹⁷

The Weberian notion that the state has the sole right to use violence is seriously threatened by this development. In reality, the monopoly is becoming more and more divided, disputed, and occasionally openly shared with non-state actors who have the power to impose coercion inside particular regions. The result is a pluralization of security governance, in which formal state institutions, unofficial community structures, and illegal armed groups share authority. Even while some of these actors arise in reaction to actual security flaws, their growth

¹¹⁶ T. *Leviathan*. Hobbes. Supra @ footnote 3

¹¹⁷ O. Kugbayi & A. Adegbami. Banditry and Insecurity: Ungoverned Spaces in Nigeria. *Law Research Review Quarterly*

makes governance more difficult and, if left unchecked, might exacerbate cycles of insecurity.

In general, a wider crisis of governance that encompasses legitimacy, institutional capacity, and state-society interactions in addition to security supply is reflected in the waning of official authority and the growth of alternative security providers. If left unchecked, this trajectory runs the risk of solidifying rival power structures that could further erode long-term stability and national cohesiveness.

5.1. Recommendations

A comprehensive enhancement of state capacity must be the top priority for policy interventions in order to successfully address Nigeria's growing insecurity and the related crisis of state legitimacy. First, security and justice institutions should strengthen their institutional capability through better training, sufficient financing, interagency coordination, and accountability systems. This will improve operational effectiveness and rebuild public trust in official security systems.¹¹⁸

Second, encouraging openness, lowering corruption, and making sure that state resources are handled fairly are all necessary to strengthen good governance standards. Rebuilding trust between the people and

¹¹⁸ AO. Thaddaeus & Albert AO (2025) *supra* @ footnote

the government is crucial for long-term stability, and this requires strengthening governance systems.¹¹⁹

Third, as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization continue to be major causes of insecurity and recruitment into violent non-state groups, it is imperative to address socioeconomic disparities. Vulnerability to crime and insurgency can be decreased by inclusive development policies that increase access to social welfare, work, and education.¹²⁰

Lastly, to improve preventive and reactive security operations, consistent investment in contemporary security infrastructure—such as intelligence systems, surveillance technologies, and fast reaction capabilities—is required. When taken as a whole, these policy initiatives provide an integrated framework for reestablishing state power and lowering the dependency on non-state actors to provide security.

5.2. Conclusion

This study has established that the prevailing insecurity in Nigeria constitutes a fundamental disruption of the social contract between the state and its citizens. Anchored in Hobbesian political thought, it underscores that the legitimacy of the state is inherently dependent on

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*

¹²⁰ VU. Ijirshar. et al. Effect of Insecurity on Agricultural Output in Nigeria. *Supra* @ footnote 104

its capacity to guarantee security and maintain order.¹²¹ The persistent inability of the Nigerian state to effectively discharge this responsibility has culminated in a widening crisis of legitimacy, evident in declining public trust, weakened institutional authority, and the increasing reliance on alternative and non-state security arrangements.¹²²

Given these developments, extensive and long-term reforms are required to restore the social contract. Strengthening institutional efficacy, improving the quality of governance, and methodically tackling the structural and socioeconomic causes of insecurity must be the main goals of such changes. Only through these combined measures can state legitimacy be rebuilt and sustained security governance be attained.

¹²¹ T. *Leviathan* Hobbes. 1996. Supra at footnote 3

¹²² SO. Nigeria's Intractable Crisis of National Insecurity and the Response of the Southwestern States Abang. Supra at footnote 39