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Freedom and Security in Nigeria: A Hobbesian Inquiry into the Role of the State

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ABSTRACT

Insecurity has become a defining feature of contemporary Nigeria, undermining both the safety and freedom of its citizens. The escalation of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and herder–farmer conflicts has generated widespread displacement, economic stagnation, and a climate of fear that corrodes trust in government. Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes a Hobbesian inquiry into the relationship between freedom and security, framed by the social contract tradition. Drawing on the insights of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls, as well as Weber and Tilly's perspectives on statehood, the study argues that the Nigerian government's inability to safeguard lives and property constitutes a fundamental breach of the social contract. The paper reviews manifestations of insecurity across Nigeria, analyzes government responses, and explores the consequences of the breached contract for legitimacy, democracy, and development. It concludes that restoring the social contract requires more than military action. It demands a comprehensive approach that integrates effective security provision, institutional reform, social justice, and inclusive governance. By situating Nigeria's crisis within philosophical and political science debates, the study demonstrates both the enduring relevance of classical contract theory and the urgent need to rethink legitimacy in fragile democracies.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between freedom and security has long been a topic of interest to political philosophers, forming the foundation of social contract traditions. In contemporary Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, this relationship assumes urgent significance due to the persistence of insecurity, weak institutions, and public distrust in the government. Nigeria's prolonged struggle with terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, herder–farmer conflicts, and communal violence has raised pressing questions about the state's capacity to fulfill its primary responsibility of protecting citizens' lives and property. As Akinola (2022) observes, insecurity in Nigeria has become not only a governance challenge but also “a philosophical crisis of legitimacy,” undermining the very foundations of political authority. The legitimacy of political authority, such as the state, on the voluntary consent of the people has preoccupied classical social contract theorists.

Classical social contract theorists argued that the state emerged to prevent precisely such conditions of disorder as are lucid in the Nigerian security ecosystem. For Thomas Hobbes, the state of nature is characterized by fear, conflict, and insecurity, where life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1651/1996). The remedy is a sovereign power, which he called the Leviathan, who is authorized to secure peace and guarantee safety. In return, individuals surrender certain freedoms for the assurance of protection. Within this Hobbesian framework, the Nigerian state's inability to safeguard its citizens represents a profound breach of the social contract. Locke (1690/1980) similarly emphasized

that political authority is justified only insofar as it secures natural rights, while Rousseau (1762/2019) located legitimacy in general will. The common thread among these traditions is that security is the minimal condition of political legitimacy. When the state fails in this regard, its moral authority erodes.

Current scholarship on Nigeria's insecurity underscores the multidimensional nature of the crisis. Scholars such as Aghedo and Eke (2021) highlight the interplay of poverty, corruption, and ethnic competition in fueling violence, while Suberu (2020) stresses the federal character of Nigeria's security dilemma, rooted in tensions between centralization and local autonomy. Others, such as Maiangwa (2023), interpret insecurity as symptomatic of “state fragility,” linking Nigeria to wider debates on governance and institutional weakness in Africa. Asuquo (2020) identified the legacy of colonialism as constitutive of the fragility of the African State to command general acceptance that is essential for security. Yet, despite this extensive literature, less attention has been given to the normative implications of insecurity for the social contract. Most analyses remain descriptive or policy-oriented, without situating the Nigerian crisis within the philosophical debates about state legitimacy and the obligations of rulers to the ruled.

This paper positions itself at the intersection of political philosophy and political science by employing Hobbes' social contract theory as a normative framework for analyzing Nigeria's insecurity. By doing so, it engages two scholarly debates. First, within political philosophy, it speaks to the enduring relevance of Hobbes and contractarian thought for evaluating state legitimacy in contexts of

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disorder (Kavka 2021; Hampton 2020). Second, within political science, it aligns with contemporary discussions of fragile states and legitimacy, particularly the idea that the monopoly of violence (Weber, 1919/2019) and the extraction–protection bargain (Tilly, 1985/2020) remain central to understanding governance failures in Africa. Nigeria, as this paper argues, illustrates the collapse of both: the state neither maintains effective coercion nor delivers adequate protection, thereby violating the fundamental terms of the social contract.

The consequences of this breach are stark. Freedom of movement, a constitutionally guaranteed right, has become precarious; citizens undertake daily activities with fear of abduction, violence, or displacement. Communities across the North-East and North-West live under the shadow of Boko Haram and bandit groups, while farmer–herder conflicts devastate the Middle Belt. The massacre at St. Francis Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, in June 2022, exemplifies how insecurity transcends regional boundaries, affecting both North and South. As Okoli and Ugwu (2022) note, the result is “a pervasive climate of fear that corrodes democratic participation, economic activity, and trust in governance.” In Hobbesian terms, the Nigerian state increasingly resembles the condition of nature it was supposed to overcome.

The central claim advanced in this paper is that the Nigerian government’s failure to provide security represents a systematic breach of the Hobbesian social contract, thereby undermining its legitimacy. Unlike mere lapses in governance, this failure strikes at the ontological core of statehood. By situating Nigeria’s crisis within this theoretical framework, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in political philosophy about the meaning of legitimacy in fragile contexts, while also speaking to policy discussions in political science on how to rebuild institutional trust and state capacity.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section revisits the social contract tradition, with special emphasis on Hobbes but also drawing on Locke, Rousseau, and contemporary contractarians. The second section reviews the current state of insecurity in Nigeria, mapping its regional manifestations. The third examines government responses and their inadequacies. The fourth considers the consequences of the breached social contract for legitimacy, democratic consolidation, and economic development. The final section proposes pathways for restoring the social contract, emphasizing the need for institutional reform, inclusive governance, and renewed commitment to the protection of lives and property.

Therefore, this paper argues that Nigeria’s crisis of insecurity is not merely a security or developmental challenge but a profound political-philosophical problem. The Hobbesian lens illuminates how the failure to guarantee security delegitimizes the state itself, compelling urgent reflection on what it means to live under a government that cannot fulfill its most basic duty. By bringing normative theory into dialogue with empirical

realities, the study contributes to both the philosophy of the state and the political science of fragile democracies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Contract Tradition and the Problem of Security

The concept of the social contract has historically provided one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the legitimacy of political authority. At its core lies a simple yet profound question: why should individuals subject themselves to the authority of the state? The answer given by classical contractarians is that individuals, recognizing the dangers of life without a governing authority, consent explicitly or tacitly to submit to political rule in exchange for security, order, and the preservation of certain rights.

Thomas Hobbes remains the most forceful advocate of this position. Writing in the context of civil war in seventeenth-century England, Hobbes (1651/1996) argued that in the “state of nature,” human beings live without a common authority to keep them in awe. In such conditions, competition, diffidence, and glory inevitably lead to conflict, culminating in “a war of every man against every man.” Life under such conditions is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” The only rational solution is for individuals to covenant together, surrendering their natural rights to a sovereign authority, the Leviathan, who wields absolute power to ensure peace and security. For Hobbes, the legitimacy of the sovereign is grounded in the necessity of escaping the perils of the state of nature. Security, not freedom, is the fundamental condition of political order.

In contrast, Locke (1690/1980) envisioned a state of nature that, while inconvenient and unstable, was not as bleak as Hobbes imagined. Locke maintained that individuals possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property, which remain binding even in political society. The social contract, in his formulation, establishes a government whose legitimacy derives from its ability to protect these rights. Unlike Hobbes’ absolute sovereign, Locke envisioned a limited government constrained by the rule of law, with the right of the people to withdraw consent if rulers betray their trust. This Lockean conception resonates strongly with modern liberal democracies, where the state’s legitimacy depends not only on providing security but also on respecting fundamental rights.

Rousseau (1762/2019) offered yet another variation, locating legitimacy in the “general will.” For Rousseau, the social contract entails individuals collectively constituting a political community in which each person, while obeying the law, remains free because the law reflects their collective will. Insecurity, for Rousseau, arises not only from violence but from inequality and domination. True freedom, therefore, requires a form of collective self-rule that ensures equality and participation.

Together, these classical theorists highlight three central themes: (1) security as the basis of political

authority (Hobbes), (2) protection of rights and limited government (Locke), and (3) equality and collective self-rule (Rousseau). These themes remain crucial for evaluating contemporary states such as Nigeria, where insecurity, rights violations, and inequalities intersect to challenge state legitimacy.

Contemporary Contractarian Perspectives

Modern contractarians have extended these insights. Rawls (1971/1999), in *A Theory of Justice*, reinterpreted the social contract through the device of the “original position” and the “veil of ignorance.” For Rawls, principles of justice are those that rational individuals would choose under conditions of equality, ensuring fairness and protection for the least advantaged. While Rawls’ project was primarily normative rather than empirical, his emphasis on justice as fairness is relevant for Nigeria, where insecurity disproportionately affects marginalized communities in the North-East, Middle Belt, and rural regions. The state’s failure to provide security here represents not only a breach of Hobbesian protection but also a violation of Rawlsian justice, as it exacerbates inequality and exclusion.

Gauthier (1986) advanced a more rational-choice contractarianism, arguing that cooperation arises from the logic of mutual advantage. In his view, political authority is legitimate if it secures arrangements that individuals could not achieve on their own. Insecurity in Nigeria, however, suggests a breakdown of this mutual advantage: citizens do not receive adequate protection in exchange for their compliance with state authority.

Contemporary scholarship also questions the limits of contractarian frameworks in pluralistic, postcolonial contexts. Mills (1997/2017), in *The Racial Contract*, argued that social contracts have historically excluded or subordinated certain groups, particularly racialized peoples. Applied to Nigeria, this critique highlights how some communities, such as rural farmers displaced by herder violence, experience state neglect more severely than urban elites, suggesting that the Nigerian contract is not equally enforced.

Thus, while Hobbes provides the central framework for this study, insights from Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, and Mills enrich our understanding by foregrounding rights, equality, justice, and exclusion.

Statehood, Legitimacy, and the Monopoly of Violence

Beyond philosophy, political science literature provides crucial tools for analyzing insecurity. Weber (1919/2019) famously defined the state as the entity that successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. In this Weberian sense, Nigeria’s persistent insecurity indicates a profound weakness: the state does not monopolize violence but competes with armed groups, militias, and terrorists. The proliferation of non-state armed actors in Nigeria, such as Boko Haram and “bandit” gangs, represents a direct challenge to Weberian sovereignty. Tilly (1985/2020) connected

state formation historically to “war-making and state-making as organized crime.” For Tilly, states emerged by eliminating internal rivals and consolidating control, essentially offering protection in exchange for taxation. This “protection racket” logic resonates with Nigeria, where citizens pay taxes and comply with the state but often receive little in return. Worse, communities sometimes perceive non-state actors as more effective providers of security than the state, by so doing eroding state legitimacy.

Fukuyama (2011; 2014) emphasizes “state capacity” as a critical dimension of governance. Weak states, he argues, fail not only in delivering security but also in providing essential services, thereby fostering cycles of poverty and violence. Nigeria, despite being resource-rich, exemplifies this paradox of weak capacity amid strong formal institutions. Scholars such as Suberu (2020) stress that Nigeria’s federal structure complicates security provision, as overlapping jurisdictions between federal and state governments generate accountability gaps.

Africanist scholars have further illuminated how insecurity interacts with neopatrimonialism, corruption, and ethnic politics. Akinola (2022) describes Nigeria’s insecurity as a “crisis of legitimacy” in which citizens increasingly withdraw loyalty from the state. Maiangwa (2023) interprets violent extremism in Nigeria as evidence of state fragility, linking local insurgencies to global patterns of weak governance. These perspectives situate Nigeria within a broader literature on fragile states, where insecurity reflects structural weaknesses rather than isolated events.

The Nigerian Debate: Insecurity as a Breach of Contract

In applying these theoretical insights to Nigeria, three themes emerge. First, insecurity represents a Hobbesian breach of the social contract. Citizens have surrendered freedom and pay taxes in exchange for security, yet the state has failed to fulfill its end of the bargain. The Leviathan appears absent, forcing communities to revert to self-help reminiscent of the state of nature.

Second, insecurity undermines Lockean rights and Rawlsian justice. The right to life and property is routinely violated, and insecurity disproportionately harms the poor, women, and rural populations. The state’s failure is not neutral; it deepens inequalities and marginalization. Third, insecurity erodes Weberian legitimacy by demonstrating the state’s inability to monopolize violence. Non-state actors exercise coercion unchecked, while the government often responds reactively or inadequately. This aligns with Tilly’s claim that without effective protection, citizens lose faith in the state.

These breaches have consequences beyond violence. They corrode trust, weaken democratic participation, deter investment, and foster displacement. They also highlight a paradox: Nigeria has formal state institutions but lacks the substantive capacity to meet its Hobbesian and Weberian obligations. This suggests that Nigeria’s insecurity cannot be understood solely as a security

challenge; it is simultaneously a philosophical breach of the social contract and a political failure of state capacity and legitimacy. Any solution, therefore, must restore the Hobbesian promise of protection, the Lockean guarantee of rights, the Rawlsian demand for fairness, and the Weberian monopoly of force. Before we attempt such solutions, let's review the crisis of insecurity in Nigeria.

A Review of Insecurity in Nigeria

The crisis of insecurity in Nigeria has intensified over the last two decades, producing widespread displacement, economic dislocation, and the erosion of citizens' trust in the state. Terrorism in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, herder–farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt, and kidnappings across the federation illustrate the extent to which the Nigerian state has struggled to meet its most basic Hobbesian obligation: the protection of lives and property. This section reviews the manifestations of insecurity in Nigeria, situating them within the theoretical frameworks of Hobbes, Locke, Rawls, Weber, and Tilly, and highlighting how they collectively reveal a profound breach of the social contract.

Terrorism and the Hobbesian State of Nature

The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East has been the most visible expression of Nigeria's security crisis. Since its escalation in 2009, Boko Haram has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions, creating one of the world's largest populations of internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2023). The group's violent campaign to establish an Islamic state exemplifies Hobbes' fear of life without a sovereign power capable of suppressing factional violence. Communities in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states live under continual threat of abduction, raids, and bombings.

From a Hobbesian perspective, the inability of the Nigerian state to suppress Boko Haram signifies a partial return to the state of nature, where individuals must rely on their strength or communal militias for protection. The fact that local vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force have often provided more immediate security than state forces illustrates a collapse of Leviathan authority. Hobbes' claim that security is the *raison d'être* of the state is vividly confirmed by Nigeria's failure in this arena.

Banditry, Kidnapping, and the Lockean Right to Life and Property

Beyond terrorism, Nigeria has witnessed a surge in banditry and mass kidnappings, particularly in the North-West. Armed groups raid villages, rustle cattle, and abduct schoolchildren for ransom, as seen in the 2021 abduction of over 300 students from Kagara, Niger State. These acts strike at the Lockean foundations of political legitimacy: the protection of life, liberty, and property.

For Locke, political authority is justified only when rulers secure natural rights. In Nigeria, however, the frequent violation of these rights underscores the

failure of the government. Bandit groups not only seize property but also deprive citizens of liberty through ransom kidnappings. The state's weak response has created a lucrative economy of violence where armed groups thrive. As Suberu (2020) notes, the Nigerian federal structure complicates accountability, with local and federal authorities often shifting responsibility for addressing insecurity.

The result is a Lockean paradox: citizens, who in theory consented to political rule to safeguard their rights, find those rights more precarious under the Nigerian state than under communal self-help arrangements. Locke's insistence that people may withdraw consent from rulers who betray their trust highlights the gravity of this breach.

Herder–Farmer Conflicts and Rawlsian Justice

In the Middle Belt, herder–farmer conflicts have escalated into deadly violence, displacing thousands and undermining food security. These conflicts, driven by desertification, land scarcity, and ethnic rivalries, disproportionately affect rural communities that are already economically disadvantaged.

A Rawlsian lens interprets this crisis as a failure of justice as fairness. Rawls (1999) argued that social institutions should protect the least advantaged, yet insecurity in Nigeria falls heaviest on precisely those groups, which include subsistence farmers, women, and children who are least able to defend themselves. The destruction of farms and the displacement of rural households deepen inequality, pushing already marginalized communities into further poverty.

Moreover, state responses have often appeared indifferent or selective. In Plateau and Benue states, mass killings of villagers have sometimes been followed by official silence or delayed intervention, while greater political attention is directed toward elite concerns. This selective responsiveness illustrates Charles Mills' (2017) critique of the “racial” or “exclusionary” contract, where some groups are implicitly excluded from the full protections of the social contract.

The Weberian Monopoly of Violence and the Proliferation of Non-State Actors

Max Weber defined the state as the entity that monopolizes the legitimate use of violence within a territory (Weber, 1919/2019). In Nigeria, this monopoly has eroded dramatically. Boko Haram controls rural swathes of the North-East; bandits operate with impunity in Zamfara and Katsina; and militias assert authority in parts of the South-East. In some regions, citizens are uncertain whether the state or non-state actors wield effective sovereignty.

This pluralization of violence erodes the legitimacy of the Nigerian state in Weberian terms. A state that cannot enforce its monopoly of violence loses its defining feature. As Okoli and Ugwu (2022) observe, insecurity in Nigeria has produced “polycentric sovereignties,” where multiple actors exercise coercion without effective state regulation.

Tilly's (1985/2020) account of state-making as organized crime is equally instructive. Nigerian citizens comply with taxation and laws, yet do not receive reliable protection in return. In some areas, citizens even pay levies to bandits or insurgents for protection, suggesting that non-state actors have appropriated the "protection racket" function that Tilly associated with statehood. This inversion starkly demonstrates how far the Nigerian Leviathan has declined.

Economic and Democratic Consequences

The consequences of insecurity extend beyond violence to economic stagnation and democratic erosion. Insecurity discourages investment, disrupts agricultural production, and inflates food prices (Aghedo & Eke, 2021). It also constrains freedom of movement, one of the most fundamental liberties in any democratic society. Citizens who fear traveling to markets, schools, or religious centers cannot fully participate in economic or civic life.

From a philosophical standpoint, this reflects a collapse of both Hobbesian security and Rawlsian justice. From a political science perspective, it aligns with Fukuyama's (2014) claim that weak states suffer cycles of violence and underdevelopment, as insecurity undermines both economic growth and institutional trust.

The Breach of the Nigerian Social Contract

Taken together, these manifestations of insecurity reveal a profound breach of Nigeria's social contract. Hobbes' core insight that security is the primary condition for political legitimacy has been undermined by the state's inability to protect citizens from Boko Haram, bandits, and kidnappers. Rampant abductions and property seizures have violated Locke's insistence on the protection of natural rights. Rawls' demand for fairness is contradicted by the disproportionate burden borne by marginalized communities. Weber's monopoly of violence has fragmented into competing sovereignties, while Tilly's protection bargain has been inverted, with citizens extorted by non-state actors rather than protected by the state.

This breach is not merely a failure of governance but a collapse of legitimacy. As Akinola (2022) argues, insecurity in Nigeria has created "a philosophical crisis" where the state no longer commands the moral authority of a legitimate sovereign. Citizens comply with the state not because of trust or protection, but out of necessity, fear, or habit. The social contract, once the foundation of political order, is frayed to the point of rupture. Amidst this crisis of insecurity in Nigeria, the question now is what responses does the government have to address them?

Government Responses to Insecurity in Nigeria

The Nigerian state, in principle, bears the primary responsibility of guaranteeing the security of lives and property. Yet its responses to insecurity over the past two decades have been widely criticized as reactive, inadequate, or even complicit. This section critically evaluates government responses through the dual lens of

political philosophy and political science, examining why the Nigerian Leviathan has been unable to restore order.

The Hobbesian Mandate and the Failure of Sovereign Authority

From a Hobbesian standpoint, the state exists to provide security, with citizens surrendering certain freedoms in return for protection. In Nigeria, however, the government's responses to insecurity often reveal a sovereign unable to fulfill this most basic function. Military deployments against Boko Haram, for example, have yielded tactical victories but no strategic resolution, as the insurgency adapts and resurges. Similarly, police and military campaigns against banditry in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna have frequently been undermined by corruption, poor equipment, and a lack of intelligence coordination.

This failure resonates with Hobbes' warning that when the sovereign cannot provide protection, citizens may lose confidence and resort to self-help. The proliferation of vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force in the North-East, Amotekun in the South-West, Ebube Agu in the South-East, illustrates how communities have stepped into the void left by the state. While these groups provide localized protection, they fragment authority, creating polycentric orders that further weaken central sovereignty. In Hobbesian terms, Nigeria risks sliding back toward the very state of nature the Leviathan was meant to overcome.

Weak State Capacity and the Weberian Monopoly of Violence

Max Weber defined the state by its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Yet Nigeria's responses demonstrate a consistent inability to monopolize force. Security agencies are not only under-resourced but also fragmented across federal, state, and local levels. The Nigerian military is stretched thin, simultaneously deployed in over thirty of the country's thirty-six states (International Crisis Group, 2021). The police, meanwhile, remain under federal control, despite calls for decentralization. This centralized structure creates a paradox: while local insecurity requires context-sensitive responses, state governors lack operational control over police forces, generating coordination failures (Suberu, 2020).

Furthermore, the legitimacy of state violence is frequently undermined by abuses. Reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and human rights violations by security forces, especially in counterinsurgency operations, erode public trust (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In Weberian terms, the state's use of violence is delegitimized when it appears predatory rather than protective. Citizens often view security agencies as guarantors of safety rather than as threats themselves, compounding the crisis of legitimacy.

Corruption, Patronage, and the Tillyan "Protection Racket"

Charles Tilly's provocative thesis that states historically

resembled organized crime syndicates by offering protection while simultaneously threatening violence, has resonance in Nigeria. In some cases, state responses to insecurity appear entangled in corruption and patronage networks. Military officers have been accused of misappropriating funds earmarked for counterinsurgency, while local politicians have been implicated in sponsoring militias for electoral purposes (Akinola, 2022).

This dynamic creates what citizens perceive as a “fake protection racket.” Taxes and oil revenues fund security agencies, but the protection delivered is minimal. Communities often negotiate directly with armed groups by paying levies to bandits for safe passage or releasing abducted persons, effectively bypassing the state. In Tillyan terms, non-state actors have usurped the protection function, leaving the Nigerian state hollow.

Federalism, Fragmentation, and Institutional Paralysis

Nigeria’s federal structure further complicates responses to insecurity. While the constitution centralizes control over security in the federal government, violence manifests locally, leaving governors powerless in practice yet held politically accountable. This creates what Suberu (2020) calls a “federalism-security paradox”: a mismatch between centralized authority and decentralized insecurity. Calls for “state police” reflect attempts to resolve this paradox, but concerns about politicization and ethnic bias hinder reform.

Institutional fragmentation also undermines intelligence and operational coordination. Rivalries between the military, police, and intelligence services frequently impede joint action. For example, counterinsurgency campaigns against Boko Haram have suffered from poor communication and duplication of effort, reducing their effectiveness. In political science terms, Nigeria exemplifies Fukuyama’s (2014) description of a state with strong formal structures but weak capacity, where institutional overlap leads to paralysis.

Selectivity, Inequality, and the Rawlsian Failure of Justice

Government responses have also been criticized for their selective enforcement, reflecting deeper inequalities. Some massacres of rural farmers in Benue or Plateau states receive minimal federal attention, while incidents affecting elite or urban populations elicit swifter responses. This disparity resonates with Rawls’ (1999) principle of justice as fairness, which holds that social institutions must protect the least advantaged. By failing to safeguard vulnerable communities, Nigerian authorities deepen perceptions of exclusion and marginalization.

Mills’ (2017) critique of the “racial” or exclusionary contract provides additional insight: states often enforce contracts selectively, privileging some groups over others. In Nigeria, ethnic and regional biases in security responses reinforce the sense that the contract is unevenly applied, fueling resentment and further insecurity.

Legitimacy, Distrust, and the Akinola Thesis

Ultimately, the government’s weak and inconsistent responses have produced a ‘legitimacy’ crisis. As Akinola (2022) argues, insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a governance failure but a “philosophical crisis” in which citizens no longer perceive the state as a legitimate guarantor of order. Trust in public institutions has plummeted, reflected in the growing reliance on self-help, vigilantism, and emigration. For many Nigerians, the Leviathan has lost its authority; what remains is a fragmented entity that commands obedience only intermittently and through coercion rather than consent. This crisis echoes Hobbes’ warning that when the sovereign fails to protect, citizens are entitled to question the contract itself. While Hobbes did not endorse rebellion, Locke (1980) explicitly affirmed the right to withdraw consent when rulers betray their trust. In contemporary Nigeria, this withdrawal manifests not in revolution but in everyday practices of non-compliance: refusal to pay taxes, evasion of state laws, and reliance on informal institutions.

This suggests that insecurity has severe consequences on the generality of society. From the economy to politics, every sector of society is affected. Insecurity undermines democracy by constraining civic freedoms. For instance, elections in conflict-prone areas are often marred by low turnout, intimidation, or outright cancellation. Citizens who fear violence are less likely to attend rallies, protest injustices, or participate in governance.

This dynamic aligns with Rousseau’s (1762/2019) insight that political legitimacy requires active participation in the general will. When insecurity silences voices and restricts assembly, democratic deliberation is weakened. The consequence is a hollowing of citizenship: Nigerians are formally citizens of a democracy but substantively excluded from meaningful participation.

Furthermore, insecurity has fueled authoritarian tendencies. Emergency powers, military deployments, and restrictive security laws expand executive authority at the expense of civil liberties. In Hobbesian terms, the Leviathan grows stronger yet simultaneously fails to deliver protection, producing what scholars such as Akinola (2022) describe as “authoritarian fragility.”

This reinforces that insecurity in Nigeria is not simply a technical problem of policing but a profound philosophical and political crisis. It corrodes legitimacy, undermines democracy, fragments society, and stalls development. Restoring the social contract will therefore require more than military campaigns: it demands rebuilding state capacity, ensuring fairness, and re-establishing the trust that sustains political authority. Without such renewal, Nigeria risks remaining trapped in a cycle of violence, fragility, and mistrust that threatens its democratic future.

Restoring the Social Contract: Pathways for Security and Legitimacy

The preceding sections have demonstrated that insecurity in Nigeria represents a profound breach of

the social contract, undermining both the philosophical foundations of state legitimacy and the empirical realities of governance. To restore order and rebuild trust between citizens and the state, it is not enough to pursue military campaigns against insurgents or bandits. What is required is a holistic reconfiguration of state capacity, social justice, and inclusive governance that re-establishes the Hobbesian promise of security, the Lockean protection of rights, the Rousseauian general will, and the Rawlsian commitment to fairness. After all, Democracy is a form of governance founded on the principle of popular sovereignty, where the authority of the state is derived from the collective will and participation of its citizens in shaping policy and leadership (Opeoluwa *et al.*, 2023). Restoring the social contract in Nigeria demands a comprehensive approach that integrates philosophical principles with practical reforms. From Hobbes, we learn that security is the first duty of the state. From Locke, legitimacy rests on protecting rights and ensuring accountability. From Rousseau, that inclusion and collective participation are essential for legitimacy. From Rawls, that justice requires protecting the least advantaged. From Weber and Tilly, effective statehood rests on monopolizing legitimate violence and maintaining a credible fiscal–security bargain. From Mills, those contracts must be inclusive to avoid reproducing exclusion and inequality.

For Nigeria, this synthesis translates into concrete imperatives: professionalizing security agencies, decentralizing policing within federal safeguards, engaging communities in inclusive dialogue, prioritizing humanitarian and developmental support for the vulnerable, regulating non-state security actors, ensuring accountability for abuses, and rebuilding the fiscal contract between citizens and the state.

Only by addressing both the normative and empirical dimensions of insecurity can Nigeria reconstitute its Leviathan as a credible protector of its people. The restoration of the social contract is not merely a technical matter of security reform; it is a philosophical and political project of re-establishing trust, justice, and legitimacy at the heart of the Nigerian state. Without such restoration, the contract remains breached, and Nigeria risks perpetual regression toward the Hobbesian state of nature it was meant to escape.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that insecurity in Nigeria marks a severe rupture of the social contract, stripping the state of its legitimacy and eroding basic rights. Using Hobbes as a central reference, supported by Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, Weber, Tilly, and Mills, the analysis reveals a failure of the Nigerian state to fulfil its foundational duty: providing security. From Hobbes, we see a return to the state of nature, where fear dominates. Locke points to the collapse of natural rights, Rousseau to the breakdown of social cohesion, and Rawls to the unequal burden on marginalized communities. Mills highlights selective

protection, while Weber and Tilly expose the erosion of sovereignty and the rise of non-state actors in governance. These failings fuel a broader crisis of legitimacy, democratic decline, and stalled development. Yet they also suggest avenues for renewal: reaffirming security as the state's core obligation, institutionalizing rights protection, expanding inclusion, decentralizing policing, and rebuilding trust through accountable governance. Nigeria's experience underscores the continued relevance and limitations of classical contractarian thought in explaining postcolonial fragility. It affirms that security is not merely a prerequisite for rights and development, but the condition upon which the entire social contract depends.

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