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Militarization of Politics and Democratic Fragility in Africa: The Nigerian Debacle

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ABSTRACT

The activities of military institutions and the gradual militarization of the political process have become a serious challenge to many emerging democracies in Africa, including Nigeria. Although Nigeria reverted to civilian rule in 1999, the continued deployment of military forces in its political processes has raised concerns about the gradual militarization of political environments with grave implications for democratic development. The paper examined the nexus between militarization of political processes and democratic fragility in Africa, focusing on how the increasing involvement of military institutions and armed youths in electoral processes and internal political affairs undermines democratic institutions and political stability in Nigeria. Using a descriptive research design, qualitative analysis, and the theory of civil-military relations to explain the dynamics between military institutions and civilian political authority, the paper argued that the increasing incursion of military elements into the political process in Africa undermines constitutional rule, restricts political participation, and erodes public trust in democratic institutions. The paper also posits that weak civilian oversight, politicization of security institutions, and persistent security challenges create opportunities for military actors to exert political influence. The study concluded that strengthening democracy in Nigeria requires reinforcing civilian control over the military, improving institutional accountability, and promoting democratic norms that limit military involvement in political processes. The paper recommended, among others, that the demilitarization of electoral security architecture, reforming political party financing and security sector patronage, strengthen civilian oversight of defense and security.

INTRODUCTION

Since independence, the relationship between democratic governance and military strategy has been a major and divisive topic in African republics. Many countries have alternated between military and civilian governance, which has a negative impact on democratic institutions and public engagement. Even though there have been fewer military takeovers since the late 1990s, a subtler trend has emerged: the gradual militarization of political processes, in which military components infiltrate areas of civilian authority. Nigeria offers perhaps the most illustrative case study of this phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa, having transitioned to a civilian government in 1999 after six military coups (Hutchful & Bathily, 1998, as cited in Bonga & Mahuku, 2022).

Despite this shift, the military remains influential in political affairs, participating in counterinsurgency, internal security, and electoral processes. This includes intimidating opponents and securitizing political competition, which shapes Nigeria's democratic evolution (Nte, 2016; Agbese, 2004). This phenomenon also reflects the broader trend across Africa, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, where military coups have reasserted military influence in politics. The wave of military coups that swept across West and Central Africa between 2020 and 2023 demonstrate that the fragile gains from post-Cold War democratic transitions are threatened by weak civilian institutions, corruption, poor governance, economic challenges, and security issues that

create vacuums for military actors to exploit (Ikpe, 2000; Nwolise, 2007; Omotola, 2009).

Democratic fragility pertains to the inadequacy of democratic institutions, norms, and practices to withstand anti-democratic challenges, such as military influence (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). In fragile democracies, key institutions like legislatures, judiciaries, and civil society organizations often lack the necessary capacity and independence to counter powerful actors, resulting in a political landscape where democratic governance is merely superficial, increasingly undermined by authoritarian tendencies. In Nigeria, the militarization of politics is evident in various ways, especially during elections, where military deployment often leads to voter intimidation and manipulation of results.

The military's dominance in internal security, particularly in insurgency-affected areas, has been exploited for political ends, targeting political opponents rather than actual security threats. Additionally, the increasing presence of retired military officials in civilian roles and the use of military language by politicians indicate a pervasive cultural militarization within Nigeria's political landscape. This paper examines the nexus between the militarization of politics and democratic fragility in Africa, using Nigeria as its primary focus. It argues that the militarization of political processes constitutes a fundamental threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria and draws on comparative African examples to contextualize the analysis.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Militarization

Militarization is understood not just as the growth of armed forces but as a process where military values and practices infiltrate civilian areas and democratic processes. Enloe (2000, as cited in Bonga & Mahuku, 2022) defines it as a social process where individuals or entities become increasingly controlled by or reliant on military institutions, incorporating military logic and hierarchy into civilian governance. In the same vein, Feaver (1996) defines militarization as the extension of military authority into political, economic, and social areas, occurring on a spectrum from coups to subtle influences over civilian decisions. Harkness (2017) highlights that in Africa, direct coups have declined, giving way to more indirect military influences in civilian politics. Nte (2016) examines militarization in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta, defining it as the integration of military institutions and practices into civilian governance. This process is viewed as both institutional and cultural, influenced by Nigeria's history of military rule, leading both military and civilian actors to engage in politics with a militarized perspective.

Nwolise (2007, as cited in Egbujiobi, 2025) posits that in Nigeria, the militarization of politics is intricately linked to the securitization of governance, where political issues are framed as security threats and managed through military force instead of political means. This approach is particularly evident in the contexts of electoral violence, communal conflicts, and separatist movements, often worsening tensions rather than addressing the root political grievances. This dynamic is crucial for grasping the interplay between militarization and democratic instability in Nigeria.

Concept of Democratic Fragility

Democratic fragility refers to vulnerabilities in democratic systems stemming from structural and institutional weaknesses that can lead to backsliding or collapse under pressure from anti-democratic forces. Although formal democratic institutions are present, they often lack sufficient consolidation to sustain governance during crises (Diamond, 2015). In such fragile democracies, institutions like electoral commissions and judiciaries are not sufficiently autonomous or respected to effectively check power abuses. Bratton and Van de Walle (1997, as cited in Akubueze, 2024) describe African democracies as often marked by "neopatrimonialism," where formal democratic institutions operate alongside informal personal patronage networks, which compromise institutional independence. They argue that the fragility of these democracies is structural, stemming from a core conflict between the principles of impersonal democratic governance and the particularistic nature of patrimonial politics.

Diamond (2015) analyzes global democratic recession, identifying three interrelated phenomena: erosion of constitutional norms restricting executive power, weakening of accountability mechanisms like legislatures

and judiciaries, and shrinking civil society space and political pluralism. He emphasizes that these erosive processes typically unfold gradually, complicating their recognition and resistance until substantial harm is inflicted on democratic institutions. Omotola (2009, as cited in Onapajo & Babalola, 2024) describes democratic fragility as the inability of democratic institutions to effectively manage political competition, uphold constitutional norms, and sustain legitimacy among citizens. He identifies the persistent fragility of Nigerian democracy as resulting from institutional shortcomings, electoral manipulation, widespread corruption, and difficulties in addressing ethnic and religious diversity. Furthermore, he posits that the militarization of political processes both reflects and exacerbates these weaknesses, impeding democratic consolidation.

Conceptualizing Civil-Military Relations

Civil-military relations describe the connection between civilian political authority and armed forces, focusing on ensuring that the military remains subordinate to elected civilian leaders. This system involves various institutional, legal, cultural, and political frameworks aimed at preventing military interference in political processes (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2003). Huntington (1957) argues that effective civilian control of the military is achieved through "objective control," which emphasizes military professionalism and national defense, allowing the military autonomy in organization and tactics while withdrawing from politics. In contrast, "subjective control" seeks to enhance civilian power over the military, leading to instability and politicization.

Ikpe (2000) discusses the impact of military rule on civil-military relations in Nigeria, highlighting how military governance has distorted the relationship between armed forces and civilian authority. He notes that the military's past political power has ingrained expectations and habits that influence civilian governance, leading to subtle military influence in decision-making that undermines democratic politics without resorting to coups. Agbese (2004) examines civil-military relations in Nigeria, highlighting how civilian governments often undermine their authority by using security institutions for political gains. This approach causes the military to see itself as a political entity instead of a professional institution, creating a cycle where civilian failures lead to increased military interference, further deteriorating civilian governance. The above suggests a potential connection or relevance to this discussion.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes civil-military relations theory, originally articulated by Huntington (1957) and Feaver (2003), and further developed by Ikpe (2000) and Agbese (2004), to analyze the interactions between military institutions and civilian political authority in democratic contexts. This framework is particularly effective for examining militarization and democratic fragility, focusing on how democracies control armed forces and the consequences

when these controls are ineffective. The core assumption of civil-military relations theory is that for democratic governance to function, military institutions must be subordinate to elected civilian authority. Military roles in national defense and internal security should be directed by accountable civilian leaders. A breakdown in this relationship, due to weak civilian oversight or military overreach, leads to compromised democratic governance and increased fragility (Feaver, 2003).

Scholars have noted several structural conditions in Africa that lead to dysfunctional civil-military relations, including the colonial legacy of military structures focused on internal control, weak civilian oversight of security forces, patronage in military appointments by civilian governments, and ongoing ethnic and regional loyalties within the military that hinder the establishment of professional cultures aligned with constitutional values (Harkness, 2017; Nwolise, 2007). The persistence of military influence in Nigerian civilian politics, despite the 1999 democratic transition, is explained by civil-military relations theory. This theory emphasizes the role of institutional arrangements, cultural legacies, and political incentives affecting both military and civilian actors, impacting democratic norms (Sunday & Okeh, 2025).

Key institutional mechanisms such as legislative oversight, civilian control of defense budgets, transparent military leadership appointments, and judicial independence are crucial for determining the genuineness of democratic military control. The study integrates theories of civil-military relations with insights from democratic consolidation, particularly focusing on democratic fragility as articulated by Diamond (2015) and Bratton and Van de Walle (1997). This combined framework helps elucidate how the militarization of political processes in Nigeria mirrors and exacerbates the structural weaknesses of its democracy, while also highlighting the institutional reforms needed to disrupt the ongoing cycle of militarization and fragility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper employed a descriptive research design to analyze the militarization of politics and democratic fragility in Nigeria and Africa. This approach allows for

a systematic examination of existing political events and historical patterns without manipulating data variables. Data for this study were obtained exclusively from secondary sources comprising 30 carefully selected publications, including 8 scholarly books, 15 peer-reviewed journal articles, 5 institutional reports, and 2 newspaper/documentary sources.

The materials were selected through a purposive sampling procedure, with emphasis placed on relevance to the study, credibility of the source, scholarly quality, and recency of publication, while seminal works on civil-military relations were retained regardless of publication date. Irrelevant, duplicate, and non-scholarly materials were excluded during the screening process. The selected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which involved systematically reviewing, coding, categorizing, and interpreting the information to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships concerning militarization and democratic fragility in Nigeria and West Africa.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Background of Military Involvement in Nigerian Politics

Nigeria's political landscape has been heavily influenced by military rule, particularly from 1960 to 1999, during which military regimes governed for approximately 29 years. The first coup, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, overthrew Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa on January 15, 1966, and sparked a counter-coup later that year. These events have significantly shaped the country's political institutions and democratic development (Siollun, 2009; Miners, 1971, as cited in Akinola & Makombe, 2024). Subsequent military regimes in Nigeria, including those of Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), Murtala Muhammed (1975-1976), Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985), Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), and Sani Abacha (1993-1998), each influenced the political landscape uniquely. The Babangida era was marked by controversial political transitions and the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, which significantly impacted Nigeria's democratic evolution. Following Babangida, Abacha's regime was noted for its violent repression of dissent,

Table 1: Nigeria's Military Regimes and Their Political Impact (1966-1999)

Period	Regime	Duration	Key Democratic Impact
1966	Aguiyi-Ironsi	6 months	Abolished federalism; triggered counter-coup
1966–1975	Yakubu Gowon	9 years	Prosecuted civil war; delayed return to civilian rule
1975–1976	Murtala Muhammed	6 months	Anti-corruption drive; assassinated in 1976 coup attempt
1976–1979	Olusegun Obasanjo	3 years	Supervised transition to civilian rule
1983–1985	Muhammadu Buhari	2 years	Overthrew elected Shagari government; suppressed press freedom
1985–1993	Ibrahim Babangida	8 years	Annulled June 12 election; manipulated transition programs
1993–1998	Sani Abacha	5 years	Severe repression; assassinations; looting of public resources
1998–1999	Abdulsalami Abubakar	1 year	Managed transition to the Fourth Republic

Source: Retrieved from Akinola & Makombe, (2024)

targeting political adversaries, and widespread corruption (Osaghae, 1998, as cited in Onapajo & Babalola, 2024). The transition to Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, led by former military head Olusegun Obasanjo, marked a major step in democratic progress. However, it was largely orchestrated by military networks and elites linked to the outgoing regime. The 1999 Constitution, drafted under military oversight, is criticized for emphasizing military values, such as executive power centralization and restricted public involvement in constitutional changes (Omotola, 2009, as cited in Onapajo & Babalola, 2024). The legacies of military rule in Nigeria significantly impact current democratic politics. Former military officers retain influential roles as governors, ministers, and party leaders. The culture and political dynamics established during military governance persist, affecting the armed forces and security services, which complicate the transition to civilian governance. Understanding these historical legacies is crucial for analyzing the ongoing militarization of Nigeria's political landscape.

Contemporary Dimensions of the Militarization of Nigerian Politics

Despite Nigeria's transition to democratic civilian governance in 1999, the militarization of political processes has continued and, in some respects, intensified in the context of the Fourth Republic. Contemporary militarization in Nigeria manifests across several interconnected dimensions: the deployment of security forces in electoral processes, the securitization of internal political conflicts, the instrumentalization of the military by ruling parties, and the growing influence of security sector actors in civilian governance structures. Each of these dimensions has contributed to the progressive erosion of democratic norms and the deepening of democratic fragility in the Nigerian context (Nte, 2016, as cited in Odigbo, Ezekwelu & Okeke, 2023; Nwolise, 2007, as cited in Egbujiobi, 2025; Omotola, 2009, as cited in Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

The most visible dimension of militarization in Nigerian democratic politics is the deployment of security forces, including the military, during elections. Elections in Nigeria have been characterized by widespread violence, voter intimidation, and the manipulation of results, and security forces have frequently been implicated in these abuses. Numerous reports by civil society organizations, election monitoring groups, and international observers have documented instances in which soldiers and other security personnel were deployed in ways that facilitated rather than prevented electoral fraud and intimidation. In states such as Rivers, Anambra, and Delta, the presence of security forces during elections has often been associated with the suppression of opposition voting rather than the protection of voters and the electoral process. The 2023 general elections, which saw widespread reports of armed group interference and INEC technical failures, further demonstrated the persistence of these dynamics (Freedom House, 2024; Omotola, 2009, as cited in

Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

This pattern becomes more explicit when examined through episodes of emergency rule and executive intervention. During the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo, the 2004 state of emergency in Plateau State led to the suspension of elected democratic structures, while a similar intervention occurred in Ekiti State in 2006. Although these actions were justified under Section 305 of the 1999 Constitution, they relied heavily on the coercive capacity of the state, particularly the military, to enforce compliance. Under Goodluck Jonathan, the 2013 state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States was implemented without suspending elected governors, even in the face of a severe insurgency. By preserving civilian authority while deploying the military strictly for security operations, this approach upheld democratic continuity and respected federal principles (International Crisis Group, 2020).

More recently, the 2025 Rivers State emergency rule declared by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, which resulted in the suspension of Governor Siminalayi Fubara and the installation of a sole administrator, further underscores this trajectory. The enforcement of the emergency framework depended on security institutions, reinforcing the centrality of military-backed authority in political regulation and crisis management (Punch, 2025). From an analytical standpoint, such interventions illustrate how constitutional provisions can be operationalized through militarized mechanisms, thereby blurring the boundary between democratic governance and command-oriented control (Aiyede, 2020; Ebo, 2022).

The securitization of internal political conflicts represents another significant dimension of contemporary militarization. Nigeria faces a range of serious security challenges, including the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency in the northeast, banditry and kidnapping in the northwest and north-central zones, separatist agitation in the southeast, and communal violence across various parts of the country. In addressing these challenges, successive civilian governments have relied heavily on military deployments and have granted the military significant operational authority in affected areas. While the security imperatives driving these deployments are genuine, the broad and often ill-defined mandates given to military forces have created opportunities for the instrumentalization of security operations for political purposes and have normalized military presence in civilian spaces across large parts of Nigerian territory (Egbujiobi, 2025; Bonga & Mahuku, 2022).

The MEND militancy in the Niger Delta, the IPOB separatist movement in the southeast, and the Shiite Muslim movement in the northwest have all been addressed primarily through military force rather than political negotiation and dialogue, with results that have frequently inflamed tensions rather than resolving them. The killing of Shiite civilians by the Nigerian Army in Zaria in 2015, an incident that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of members of the Islamic Movement of

Nigeria and the detention of its leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, illustrates the dangers of relying on military force to manage political and religious conflicts that require political solutions. The use of military force in these contexts has further normalized the militarization of political conflict management and weakened the civilian mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution that are essential to democratic governance (Amnesty International, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 2024; Nwolise, 2007, as cited in Egbujiobi, 2025).

The instrumentalization of security institutions by ruling parties represents a particularly damaging form of militarization because it directly politicizes institutions that should remain above partisan politics. Under

successive administrations of the Fourth Republic, security appointments have frequently been made based on political loyalty and ethnic affiliation rather than professional merit, creating security leadership that owes its position to political patrons rather than to professional standards and constitutional mandates. This politicization of security institutions generates incentives for security officials to serve the interests of their political patrons rather than the constitutional interests of democratic governance, and it creates a reservoir of politically oriented security actors who may be deployed against political opponents or used to manipulate political outcomes (Agbese, 2004, as cited in Onapajo, 2021; Ikpe, 2000, as cited in Ayandeji, 2025).

Table 2: Key Incidents of Security Force Deployment in Nigerian Electoral Processes

Year	Election/Event	Security Incident	Democratic Implication
2003	General Elections	Military deployed; widespread reports of voter intimidation	Credibility of elections undermined; opposition suppressed
2007	General Elections	Security forces complicit in result manipulation in several states	Elections widely condemned as fraudulent by international observers
2011	Post-election violence	Military deployed in northern states; hundreds killed in post-election violence	Security response inadequate to protect democratic processes
2015	Zaria Massacre	Nigerian Army killed hundreds of Shiite civilians; leader detained	Normalization of military use of lethal force against civilian groups
2019	General Elections	Widespread security force deployment; reports of intimidation in Rivers State	Electoral process compromised; democratic credibility weakened
2023	General Elections	INEC technical failures combined with security concerns; violence in multiple states	Public trust in democratic institutions further eroded

Source: Amnesty International (2016); Freedom House (2024)

Militarization of Politics in Broader African Context

The militarization of political processes in Nigeria reflects a broader issue of democratic fragility in Africa, where military institutions frequently undermine civilian authority. Recent military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon from 2020 to 2023 highlight ongoing threats to democracy, as military leaders often justify their actions by citing governmental incompetence, corruption, and security failures, indicating that such conditions are prevalent across the continent (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015; Siegle & Cook, 2020). The military coup in Mali in August 2020, which ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, was fueled by public dissatisfaction with the government's inability to control jihadist insurgency. Colonel Assimi Goita, the coup leader, depicted the military's role as essential for restoring security and governance.

A subsequent coup in May 2021 further solidified military power, leading to postponed elections and an alliance with Russia's Wagner Group for security assistance. This situation epitomizes how real security threats can legitimize military interventions, entrenching military rule and eroding democratic institutions (International Crisis Group, 2022). The intractability of the crisis in Sudan also illustrates the link between militarization and democratic

fragility in Africa. The 2019 uprising that ousted Omar al-Bashir initially promised a democratic transition, but military dominance derailed it, culminating in a coup in October 2021. The resultant conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since April 2023 has plunged the nation into a severe civil war and humanitarian crisis, highlighting how militarization can obstruct democratic progress and provoke widespread political violence (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Scholars have identified several common structural factors that facilitate militarization across African contexts. For instance, Gyimah-Boadi (2015) highlights that the persistent military influence in African politics stems from the inadequate institutionalization of democratic governance. Although many African nations have adopted democratic frameworks such as constitutions and legislatures, these often lack the necessary autonomy, resources, and public legitimacy to effectively constrain political power. Consequently, the military and other powerful actors maintain substantial informal political influence, which can be activated when formal democratic systems do not yield satisfactory results.

Harkness (2017) on the other hand analyzes military coups in Africa, highlighting ethnic fractionalization

within military institutions as a crucial factor for political intervention. She posits that military officers, perceiving unequal political or military advantages for other ethnic groups, are more inclined to support or initiate coups to redistribute power. This is especially evident in Nigeria, where the military's ethnic composition and promotions create tensions intertwined with broader political dynamics.

Implications of Militarization for Democratic Fragility in Nigeria

The militarization of political processes has profound and multifaceted implications for democratic fragility in Nigeria. At the most fundamental level, it undermines the constitutional principle of civilian supremacy over the military, which is essential to democratic governance. When security forces operate with political rather than constitutional mandates, and when their deployment is determined by partisan interests rather than democratic imperatives, the foundational principle of civilian control of the military is violated, creating a precedent that weakens the normative framework of democratic governance and emboldens further military involvement in political affairs (Huntington, 1957, as cited in Egbujiobi, 2025; Feaver, 2003, as cited in Ayandeji, 2025).

The militarization of electoral processes has particularly severe implications for the legitimacy and credibility of democratic governance in Nigeria. Elections are the principal mechanism through which democratic systems derive their legitimacy, and when elections are perceived as manipulated through the deployment of security forces, public confidence in democratic institutions erodes. Survey data from the Afrobarometer consistently indicate that Nigerians express low levels of trust in electoral institutions and high levels of concern about the integrity of electoral processes. This deficit of institutional legitimacy contributes to democratic fragility by weakening the bonds of civic allegiance to democratic governance that are necessary for the resilience of democratic institutions under stress (Omotola, 2009, as

cited in Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

The militarization of political conflict management also has significant implications for democratic fragility by undermining the development of civilian mechanisms for peaceful political competition and conflict resolution. In a healthy democracy, political conflicts are managed through negotiation, legal adjudication, and democratic contestation. When political conflicts are habitually addressed through military force, these civilian mechanisms atrophy and citizens learn to resolve their political grievances through violence or to defer to military authority rather than engaging with democratic institutions. This dynamic is particularly visible in the Niger Delta region, where the military's long-standing role in managing oil-related conflicts has contributed to a political culture in which armed militancy rather than democratic engagement is often seen as the most effective strategy for advancing political interests (Egbujiobi, 2025; Bonga & Mahuku, 2022).

The politicization of security institutions has further implications for democratic fragility by creating perverse incentives within the security sector that undermine professionalism and constitutional orientation. When security officers are appointed on the basis of political loyalty rather than professional merit, and when promotions and deployments are determined by partisan considerations, the organizational culture of security institutions shifts away from constitutional values toward the logic of political service. This transformation creates security institutions that are poorly equipped to fulfil their constitutional functions of protecting citizens and upholding democratic governance, while being well-positioned to serve as instruments of political repression and electoral manipulation (Ayandeji, 2025). Nwolise (2007, as cited in Egbujiobi, 2025), argues that the militarization of political processes has contributed significantly to the erosion of public trust in government institutions across Nigeria. He contends that when citizens observe security forces being deployed not to protect them but to serve the interests of political

Table 3: Dimensions of Militarization and Their Implications for Democratic Fragility in Nigeria

Dimension of Militarization	Mechanism	Democratic Implication
Military deployment in elections	Voter intimidation; result manipulation; suppression of opposition	Erosion of electoral legitimacy; weakening of democratic mandate
Securitization of political conflicts	Military force used against civilian political movements	Atrophy of civilian conflict resolution mechanisms; normalization of violence
Politicization of security appointments	Appointments based on political loyalty rather than professional merit	Corruption of security sector professionalism; security sector as instrument of political repression
Military veterans in civilian governance	Former officers hold key political positions; military culture in civilian governance	Persistence of military political culture; weakening of civilian democratic norms
Securitization of governance	Political challenges framed as security threats requiring military responses	Shrinking of civil society space; restriction of political freedoms

Source: Compiled by the Authors from reviewed literature

elites, their trust in the state as a neutral protector of rights and democratic processes is irreparably damaged. This erosion of institutional trust is a key indicator of democratic fragility because it weakens the legitimacy of democratic governance and creates conditions in which citizens may become receptive to non-democratic alternatives, including military rule.

Comparative African Perspectives on Militarization and Democratic Fragility

A comparative examination of militarization and democratic fragility across Africa reveals both the specificity of the Nigerian experience and the broader structural conditions that facilitate military involvement in political processes across the continent. Several African states have navigated the challenges of civil-military relations with greater success than Nigeria, providing useful lessons and reference points for understanding what conditions facilitate or inhibit democratic consolidation in military-affected political environments (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

Ghana is frequently cited as a comparative success story in the management of civil-military relations in West Africa. Like Nigeria, Ghana experienced multiple military coups between independence and its democratic transition in 1992. However, Ghana's subsequent democratic development has been considerably more stable, with peaceful transfers of power between competing parties in 2000, 2008, 2016, and 2020. Scholars have attributed Ghana's relative democratic stability to several factors, including the development of stronger civilian institutions with greater public legitimacy; the effective reform of the security sector under democratic civilian oversight; the growth of a vibrant civil society capable of monitoring and challenging political power; and the emergence of political parties with genuine programmatic commitments that have enabled peaceful electoral competition (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015, as cited in Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

Botswana presents another comparative case of interest, as it has maintained continuous democratic governance since independence without experiencing military coups or significant militarization of political processes. Scholars attribute Botswana's democratic resilience to its relatively small military, which has never developed the institutional scale or political ambition of its counterparts in larger African states; the strength of its civilian institutions rooted in pre-colonial political traditions of consultation (kgotla); and the effective management of diamond revenues in ways that have created a fiscally strong state capable of delivering public goods without generating the resource curse dynamics that have undermined governance in oil-producing states like Nigeria (Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

The contrast between these comparative cases and Nigeria underscores the importance of institutional development, civilian governance quality, and the management of natural resource wealth in determining the vulnerability

of democratic systems to militarization. Where civilian institutions are strong, responsive, and legitimate, military actors have fewer opportunities and incentives to intervene in political processes. Where civilian governance fails to deliver security, economic development, and democratic participation, the conditions for militarization and democratic fragility multiply. The lesson for Nigeria is therefore not merely about reforming civil-military relations in the narrow institutional sense but about the broader project of democratic consolidation through institutional strengthening, economic development, and the cultivation of a civic culture oriented toward democratic values and practices (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024; Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the militarization of politics remains a major challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The continued involvement of military institutions in electoral processes, security management, and political affairs weakens civilian authority, undermines democratic institutions, and threatens political stability. Nigeria's experience reflects broader trends across West Africa, where weak governance, insecurity, and fragile institutions have contributed to democratic setbacks and the resurgence of military interventions. Sustainable democracy, therefore, depends on strengthening civilian control of the armed forces, promoting accountable governance, and reinforcing democratic institutions capable of managing political conflicts without excessive reliance on military force.

To address these challenges, the study recommends that the Nigerian government reduce military involvement in electoral activities by empowering the Nigeria Police Force and other civilian security agencies to provide election security. It also recommends comprehensive security sector reforms to professionalize the armed forces, depoliticize appointments and promotions, and strengthen civilian oversight through the National Assembly. Furthermore, political and electoral reforms should promote transparency, accountability, and institutional independence to reduce political interference in security matters. Implementing these measures will strengthen democratic governance, enhance public confidence in state institutions, and promote long-term political stability in Nigeria.

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