

A nation's voice at the crossroads: An urgent call to defend Nigeria's civic space and journalism

Introduction

Ahead of the public presentation of the 2024 Journalism and Civic Space Status Report, this policy brief draws from the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism's (WSCIJ) 2023 report [Hushed Voices in an Election Year](#). It presents critical findings on the state of civic freedoms and their intersection with journalism in Nigeria. It shows how a shrinking, increasingly violent civic space, is affecting journalists, activists, and citizens alike.

Core freedoms like expression, assembly, and participation are under threat. This policy brief calls on all arms of government, institutions, civil society, and international partners to act with urgency to safeguard Nigeria's democracy and journalism.

In 2023, WSCIJ monitored news reports and civic space infractions during key political events, including the general and off-cycle elections. Lagos State topped the list of states where violations happened, it was followed by Rivers and the Federal Capital City (FCT). The findings build on earlier research published in 2022 – [Hushed Voices and the Media's Defence of the Civic Space](#), and point to a chilling trend – Nigeria's civic space is becoming increasingly "hushed".

Through a [national conference](#), [stakeholder meetings with media, security agencies](#), and the judiciary in collaboration with the office of the National Security Adviser, and other engagements, WSCIJ along with the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Democracy (CJID) and other partners, has consistently amplified these concerns. This policy brief continues that effort calling for urgent reforms to reclaim civic space, protect journalism, and ensure no Nigerian is silenced for speaking, assembling, or participating in public life.

Motunrayo Alaka
Executive Director/CEO, WSCIJ

Approach to the study

To highlight Nigeria's shrinking civic space realities, the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ) designed the study to reflect the depth and pattern of civic space infringements nationwide, drawing on data generated from various media sources. It is a multi-layered, media report-driven approach which ensured that the study mapped the scale of civic space infringements and how it affects journalists. The findings offer policymakers, the news media, civil society, and the public an evidence-based conclusion for urgent action in protecting Nigeria's civic space and journalism.

How the evidence was gathered: Between January and December 2023, the WSCIJ monitored media coverage by 32 diverse Nigerian news outlets. This comprehensive media sweep included: National Dailies (*The Punch*, *Daily Independent*, *Leadership*, *The Guardian*, *ThisDay*, *Tribune*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust*, *Blueprint* and *Business Day*); online News Platforms (BBC Pidgin, *Champion*, *Cross River Watch*, *Daily Nigerian*, *Daily Post*, *Daily Report Nigeria*, *Foundation for Investigative Journalism [FIJ]*, *International Centre for Investigative Reporting [ICIR]*, *Osun Defender*, *Peoples Gazette*, *PM News*, *Premium Times*, *Primus Media City*, *Pulse*, *Sahara Reporters*, *The Cable*, *The Nigerian Lawyer*, and *WikiTimes*); and Broadcast organisations (*Channels TV*, *Africa Independent Television [AIT]*, *TV360* and *Nigerian Television Authority [NTA]*). From these sources, 134 news stories were purposively sampled to ensure rich perspectives from print, digital, and broadcast news media. Each story was selected from newspaper websites, online platforms, and YouTube channels to guarantee both breadth and depth in coverage.

Methodological mix: The study combined Content Analysis (CA) and Critical Incident Analysis (CIA). Content Analysis provided the quantitative foundation as news stories were dissected and coded, and their data distilled into simple percentages, infographics, and charts to reveal patterns and trends.

Turning data into insight: Quantitative data from the content analysis were descriptively presented, thus simplifying complex patterns with clear visuals and statistics. Qualitative insights from the CIA were thematically organised, using real-life examples to underscore the human impact behind the numbers.

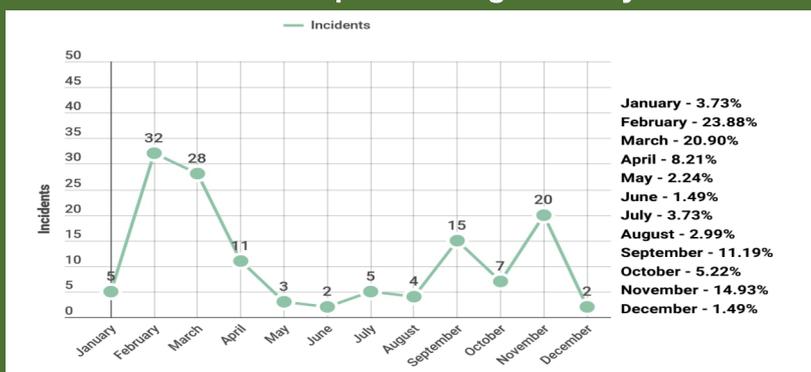
Key findings - Mapping the assault and resilience of Nigeria's civic space:

The results reveal a civic space under siege, where state and non-state actors deploy violence and other repressive tactics to intimidate and suppress journalists and other citizens. The data are beyond numbers; they narrate the experiences of Nigerians including journalists whose rights have been constrained, whose voices were muted and whose hopes for a vibrant democracy were dashed. Below are some of the highlights of the findings:

Election seasons were flashpoints of suppression:

In February, March and November 2023, incidents of civic space violations surged, showing how political events can trigger waves of repression rather than the celebration of democracy.

Incidents of civic space infringement by months



The police and political thugs are major perpetrators: State and non-state actors were identified as leading perpetrators of civic space violations. Among state actors, the Nigerian Police dominates the list, accounting for nearly half(49%) of all state-led infringements. Of non-state actors, political thugs were implicated in a staggering 79% of attacks; mob attacks took (5%); religious extremists (2%); and unidentified assailants (5%).

State actors causing infringement in the civic space

State Actors	% of instances	Number of instances
Nigeria Police	49.9%	45
Politicians	19.8%	18
Nigerian Army	6.6%	6
Independent National Electoral Commission	5.5%	5
National Broadcasting Commission	4.4%	4
Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps	4.4%	4
Department of State Security	2.2%	2
Judiciary	2.2%	2
Federal Road Safety Corps	1.1%	1
National Drug Law Enforcement Agency	1.1%	1
Nigeria Customs Service	1.1%	1
State House of Assembly	1.1%	1
University Management	1.1%	1

Physical assault and barring of journalist are recurring tactics: The machinery of suppression is both blunt and subtle. Violent tactics manifest as physical assaults on journalists, protesters and voters (35%); fatalities resulting from confrontations (20%); shooting teargas to disperse crowds and silence dissent (16%); threats and intimidation (10%). Non-violent tactics include journalists barred from reporting (27%); arrest of protesters and journalists in the line of duty (19%); legal charges wielded as tools of intimidation (15%); and detention without due process (10%).

Lagos, Rivers and the FCT are major flashpoints: Some regions constitute the epicentre of violations. Lagos State is the most affected, accounting for over one-fifth of reported cases (21.6%); Rivers State, (11.9%); the Federal Capital Territory, (9.7%); Imo, (8.2%); and Kano, (7.5%). This percentages could have been skewed because of the concentration of news media organisations in major cities but they are nevertheless evidence indicators of real threats to civic rights.

Journalists are unsafe while on duty: Findings show how the press is hindered from performing its role as democracy's watchdog: assaults on journalists in the line of duty (90%); journalists barred from carrying out their dues (27%); individuals (journalists and other citizens) facing charges (15%); instances of detention of journalists and other citizens (10%).

Protest grounds, polling units and courts are scenes of repression: Protest grounds account for 26% and polling units 25.4% of the scenes of civic space infringements, thus transforming the sphere of public perception into a battleground for rights. Court premises and political campaign grounds also account for 7.5% each.



Figure 1: Arise TV Cameraman, Opeyemi Adenihun with injuries on his face after suffering an attack while on election duty in Lagos

Source: Arise News Facebook page

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Civil liberties are threatened: Freedom of expression was stifled in 46% of the instances, freedom of peaceful assembly was eroded in 31% of the cases, and freedom of participation was restricted in 19% of the situations. This has taken a toll on free expression, and the consequences are dire.

Recommendations for defending Nigeria's civic space

This report paints a dire picture of Nigeria's civic space and safety of journalists. More conscious attempts must be made to reclaim the public sphere, and measures must be enacted to defend the rights of all citizens. The following recommendations chart a path toward a freer, tolerant, and more inclusive civic space.



Strengthen legal protection for civil liberties: The surge in violent and non-violent infringements, especially during election seasons, signals legal safeguards and enforcement gaps. It is crucial to review and amend existing laws to explicitly protect freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and participation, and ensure that they align with international human rights standards.



Reform security sector practices: The government and relevant authorities must establish independent oversight mechanisms to investigate and sanction abuses by security operatives and agencies; mandate civic rights training for all law enforcement and security personnel, emphasising non-violent crowd management and respect for fundamental freedoms; and deploy rapid response teams to mediate and de-escalate tensions during protests and elections.



Foster culture of accountability and transparency: The Nigerian government should create a national civic space observatory a multi-stakeholder platform for monitoring, documenting and responding to infringements in real time; publish regular reports on civic space status, with disaggregated data by state, perpetrator and type of infringement; and encourage public reporting of violations through secure and anonymous digital channels.



Leverage technology for civic engagement: It is necessary to seize the advantage of the tech boom and invest in technological platforms for real-time incident reporting, legal support and public mobilisation. There is a need to promote digital literacy and civic space surveillance to help citizens navigate and resist online disinformation.



Empower civil society and the media: It is important for donors and International Non-Governmental Organisations to fund and support legal aid services for journalists, protesters and activists facing prosecution or detention; facilitate capacity-building workshops for civil society organisations on digital security, legal rights and advocacy strategies; and promote partnerships between media houses and civil society to amplify voices and share resources for collective protection.



Safeguard civic space during elections: It is imperative to deploy independent election observers with a mandate to monitor and report on civic space conditions; engage political parties and candidates in public commitments to uphold civil liberties before, during and after elections; and implement early warning systems to detect and prevent escalations at polling units and protest sites.



Address threats posed by non-state actors: Political actors often incite felons, party loyalists, and mobs to violence, escalating civic space infringements. To deter them, it is important to strengthen community policing initiatives and build trust among stakeholders; this should run concurrently with public awareness campaigns on the value of peaceful assembly and the dangers of political thuggery.

Conclusion

Nigeria's civic space is under severe threat, with no state immune from the rising tide of infringements. The civic space infringements are orchestrated by those who swore to protect us. Lagos stands out as the epicentre of nationwide violations. Journalists and citizens alike suffer suppression by state and non-state actors, with the police and politicians frequently leading the onslaught. Alarming, 90% of attacks on journalists occur in the line of duty. The consequences are stark: Freedom of expression was stifled in 46% of the instances, freedom of peaceful assembly was eroded in 31% of the cases, and freedom of participation was restricted in 19% of the situations. These statistics depict the silencing of voices, stifling of dissent and erosion of democratic values. There is a need to reclaim the public sphere and restore the fundamental freedoms that are the lifeblood of every democracy. Decisive and urgent action must be taken. Otherwise, Nigeria risks entrenching a culture of fear and impunity, thus undermining its democracy. Policymakers, civil society, news media, and the international community must work collaboratively to reverse the trend of impunity, protect fundamental freedoms, and rejuvenate the civic space to be a safe and vibrant arena for journalism and Nigerians.

Download the full report here: bit.ly/CSGreport

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For further inquiries: Contact Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigate Journalism (WSCIJ) via contact@wscij.org or call +234 908 251 5179

