

Hushed Voices in an Election Year

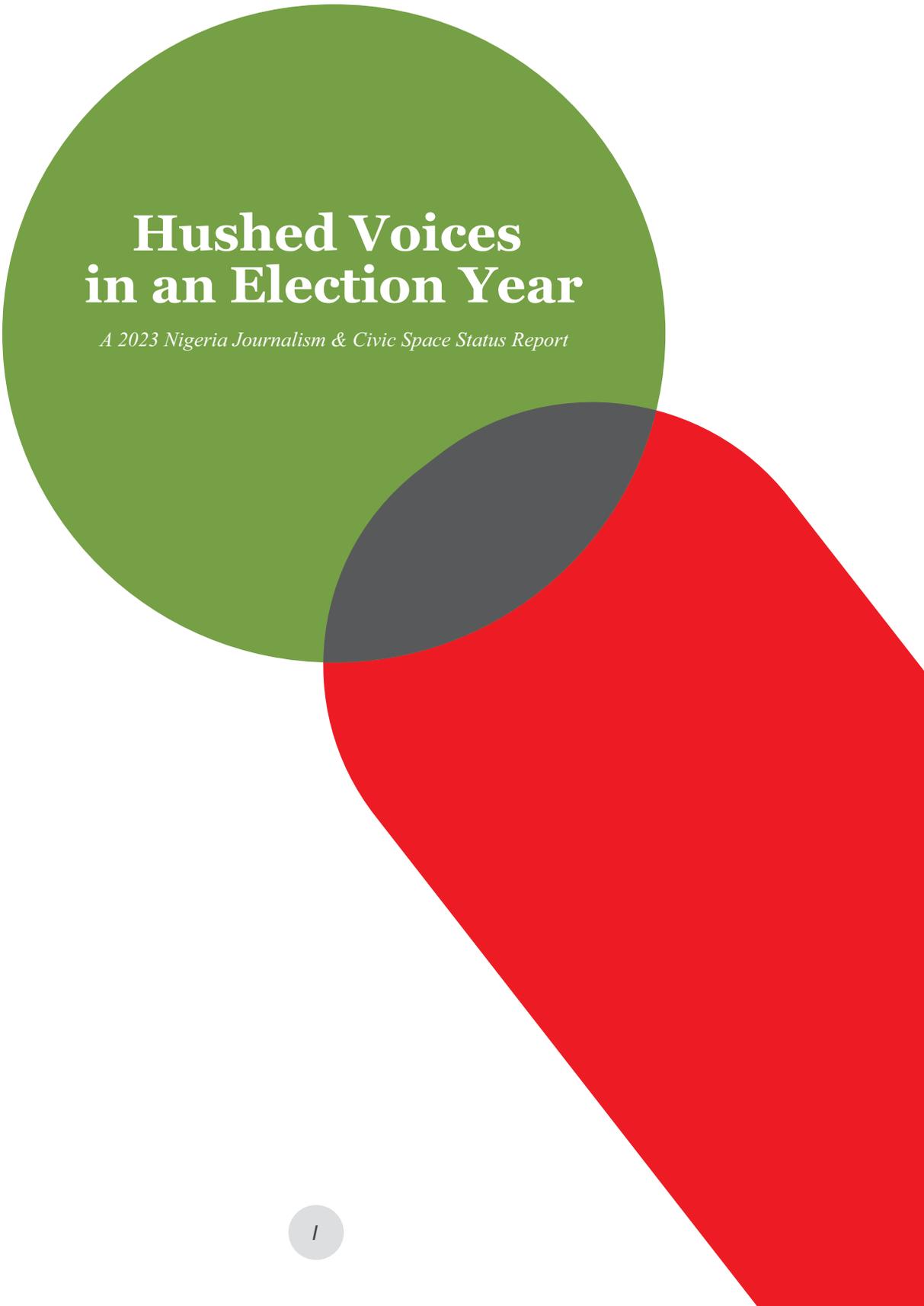
A 2023 Nigeria Journalism & Civic Space Status Report



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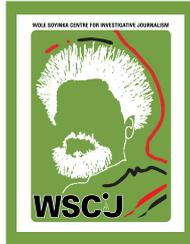
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Executive Summary

This Civic Space Status Report for 2023 is the second edition of the report and reflects our commitment to upholding and bringing to the fore, the vital functions of the press and other civic actors in protecting the civic space. It highlights the state of civic space; and offers an in-depth evaluation of the state of civic freedom in Nigeria, emphasising the significant challenges encountered by journalists, activists, and citizens. Specifically, it conducted a comprehensive assessment of civic space infringements in Nigeria for the year 2023. It analysed media coverage of these infringements, and categorised incidents by month and state.

It also examined the occurrences of infringements based on gender, differentiated between violent and non-violent forms; identified the perpetrators, whether state or non-state actors; and highlighted the victims and survivors. Again, it detailed the venues where infringements occurred; and distinguished between those affecting journalists and media workers, and those affecting citizens, activists, and other stakeholders. It also analysed media reportage of civic space infringements by genre. Essentially, this Report addresses the shrinking civic space by focusing on the plight of investigative journalists in the line of duty, the suffocating economic environment and the harsh political economy of news media organisations, and issues of human rights and civil liberties.

Content analysis (CA) complemented with critical incident analysis (CIA) were the methods of investigation, while 134 news stories published/aired by 32 media organisations (10 national dailies; 18 online news platforms; and four (4) broadcast organisations) on civic space infringements by state and non-state actors formed the study population.

Key findings indicate that various incidents of civic space infringements were particularly frequent during election periods, notably in February, March, and November 2023, highlighting the influence of political events on civil liberties. Lagos State recorded the highest number of incidents, followed by Rivers State and the Federal Capital Territory.

Distilling the forms of infringements, they were categorised into violent and non-violent forms. Violent infringements accounted for 64% of the incidents and included assaults, fatalities, teargassing, threats, abductions, and shootings. While non-violent infringements constituted 36% and included actions such as barring journalists from carrying out their duties, arrests, charges, detention, demolition of broadcast stations, crowd dispersals, harassment and sanctions.

The above key findings will function as evidence that would be used for engaging the government, media, and other stakeholders; aimed at protecting the civic space and safeguarding the democratic freedom needed for the media to perform its constitutional responsibility.



Acronyms

- AIT:** Africa Independent Television
- APC:** All Progressives Congress
- BBC:** British Broadcasting Corporation
- CA:** Content Analysis
- DSS:** Department of State Services
- FRSC:** Federal Road Safety Corps
- ICIR:** International Centre for Investigative Reporting
- INEC:** Independent National Electoral Commission
- NBC:** National Broadcasting Commission
- NDLEA:** National Drug Law Enforcement Agency
- NSCDC:** Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps
- NTA:** Nigerian Television Authority
- VOA:** Voice of America
- WSCIJ:** Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism



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Introduction

The 'Civic space' refers to the conditions that dictate the extent to which individuals within a society can exercise their fundamental rights of association, assembly, and expression (CIVICUS, 2020). It also serves as a platform for sharing ideas, fostering collaboration, problem-solving, rights defence, and enhancing well-being (UNOHCHR, 2014). Therefore, it can be said that Civic Space enables individuals and organisations to actively engage in civic duties, make informed decisions regarding social, economic, and political development, advance common interests, and promote democratic societies (CIVICUS, 2020).

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR, 2024), an open and pluralistic civic space that guarantees freedom of expression, opinion, assembly, and association is a prerequisite for sustainable development and peace. Hossain et al (2018) affirmed this view, concluding that while the openness of a country's civic space may not negatively impact short-term growth, economic crises are more likely in environments where civic space is restricted, and development is unlikely to yield equitable, sustainable, or inclusive outcomes under such conditions.

Zeroing in on the media with focus on Africa, Obiezu (2023), citing a press freedom advocacy group, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), stated that African nations recorded some of the biggest drops in their press freedom rankings over the past year. Drawing from the RSF 2023 World Press Freedom Index, he posited that it was difficult for journalists to operate in nearly 40% of the nations in Africa, compared with 33% last year.

Similarly, looking at the status of civic space in sub-Saharan Africa, CIVICUS (2020) posited that it is largely restrictive, with 45 out of 50 countries and territories categorised as obstructed, repressed, or closed. Consequently, most people in this region face significant barriers to exercising their civic freedoms. Only the island nations of Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe are considered to have open civic space. In contrast, Mauritius, Namibia, and Seychelles have seen a decline in their civic space.

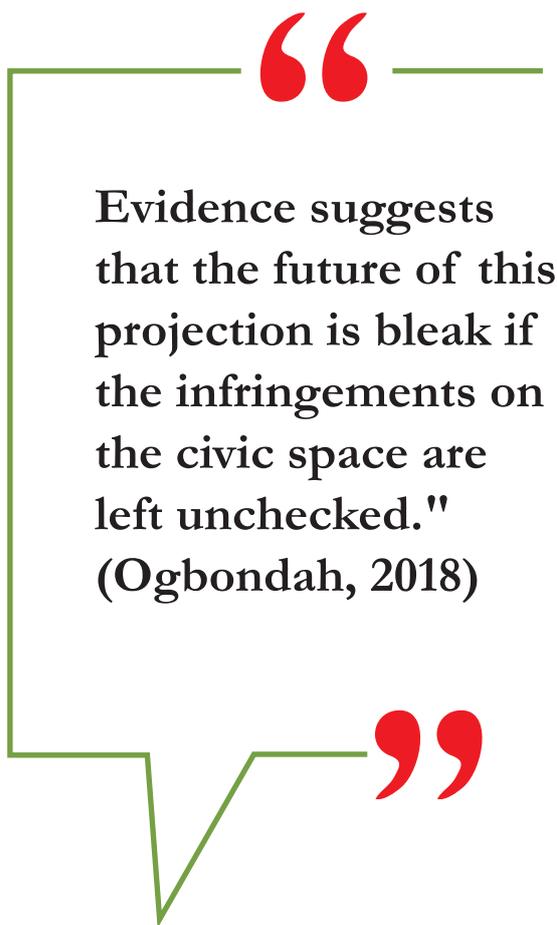
Specifically, in Nigeria, Ogbondah (2018, p. 23) stated that “since 1999, the National assembly has enacted noteworthy legal reforms ...[on] the media having abrogated at least one anachronistic press law”, that is, anti-press law, known as Decree 4 of 1984, which made the publication of any information capable of embarrassing the government or its official an

offence; and also enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) on May 28, 2011. However, from a historical perspective, he painted a picture of constrained media ranging from arbitrary detention of journalists to closure of media houses and confiscation of media products that characterised the era of military dictatorship; and makes a projection of it being committed to the dustbin of history. Notwithstanding, evidence suggests that the future of this projection is bleak if the infringements on the civic space are left unchecked.

According to Oxfam (2020), despite the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999, there persists a prevalence of restrictive practices and attacks on freedoms of information, expression, assembly, and to some extent, association within the Nigerian civic sphere (Oxfam, 2020). Again, the 2022 Civic Space Status report titled, *Hushed voices and the media's defence of the civic space*, found that the civic space in Nigeria is threatened and shrinking, which suggests that the state is attempting to close the civic arena of contestation against civil society organisations (CSOs) such as the media, NGOs and citizens for expressing their views and discontent on the state of the nation; and trying to bring state actors to account on poor

governance and human rights abuses (WSCIJ, 2022). According to the report, there is an attempt by state actors to hush the voices of journalists in the line of duty, who brought to the fore issues confronting our nation's development and citizens views and discontent on the state of the nation; not discounting bringing state actors to account on poor governance and human rights abuses.

Furthermore, in commemoration of 2022 World Press Freedom Day, media professionals took stock of press freedom in Nigeria; and expressed concern that the free space is being compressed by strangulating laws and absence of journalists' safety leading to a decline in the civic space. This suggests that journalism is endangered in Nigeria. In particular, the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) said that the regular



Evidence suggests that the future of this projection is bleak if the infringements on the civic space are left unchecked." (Ogbondah, 2018)

attacks on journalists carrying out their legitimate editorial assignments by overzealous security agents, the current attempts to criminalise journalism practice in the country through obnoxious bills, the suffocating economic environment and harsh political/economic policies of the federal government, have in the past few years, made it almost impossible for the media sector to carry out its constitutional responsibility for the benefit of the citizens.

The Guild added that the inalienable right to access and disseminate information through an independent press is under attack, and called for the protection of the media, adding, that democracy is in danger when a free press is threatened.

These show that the media in Nigeria has been at the receiving end of attacks by both state and non-state actors aimed at stifling it and ultimately shrinking the civic space. This is paradoxical given the fact that in Nigeria, the media has been an active actor in the civic space – through the struggle for independence to the enthrone civil rule in 1999; not discounting the fight against human rights abuses. Given the important role of the media in maintaining an open civic space so that the people can claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them, it is important for it to maintain its independence in order to remain a veritable tool for holding authorities accountable; and also remain a formidable institution in defence against the threats that shrinks the civic space.

Hence, it is important to monitor the civic space and use evidence from the monitoring to engage the government, media and other stakeholders to protect the civic space; eliminate civic space infringements; and safeguard the democratic freedom needed for the media to perform its constitutional duties and for citizens to demand accountability from duty bearers.



Methodology

This assessment of civic space infringements (abuses of journalists, citizens, activists and other stakeholders within the civic space) spanned January - December 2023. Using media's coverage of civic space infringements in Nigeria, it distilled the incidents of civic space infringements by months and states of the federation; occurrences of infringements by gender and place; forms of infringements (violent and non-violent); perpetrators of infringements (state and non-state actors); victims/survivors; venues of civic space infringements for journalists and other media workers; venues of citizens, activists and other stakeholders civic space infringements; and media reportage of civic space infringements by genre.

Content analysis (CA) complemented with critical incident analysis (CIA) were adopted as methods of investigation. One hundred and thirty-four (134) news stories published/aired by 32 media organisations (10 national dailies, 18 online news platforms, and four (4) broadcast organisations) on civic space infringements by state and non-state actors formed the study population.

The 134 news story content analysed were purposively sampled from the websites of dailies, platforms of the online news media, and YouTube channels of broadcast organisations. While some incidents reported in news stories were critically analysed and used to exemplify/reinforce the findings from CA on civic space infringements in Nigeria. They exemplified the nature of infringements and the perpetrators in line with the objectives of this project; and excerpts from some news stories on specific instances were used to buttress the quantitative data.

Quantitative data gathered from CA were analysed using simple percentages, infographics and charts. While data gathered from critical qualitative interpretive analysis, that is, excerpts of critical incidents from the 134 purposively sampled stories were descriptively analysed and used to complement data from CA.



Limitation

A significant constraint within the scope of this study lies in the availability of contents for analyses. Although abundant television materials were accessible via YouTube, the absence of a reliable online repository for radio contents posed a notable challenge. Consequently, while effort made to get radio broadcast contents online for the period studied proved abortive, the broadcast data used for this report was limited to television sources. Notwithstanding, the findings are sufficiently indicative to reach a generalisation on the broadcast media.



Operational definition of terms

Infringement: This refers to actions or policies that violate or encroach upon the rights and freedoms of individuals or groups. They include a range of activities such as suppression of free speech, unlawful detention and arrest among others.

Victims: These are individuals who lost their lives while their rights were being infringed upon. These individuals might have been involved in activities such as reporting an incident, advocating for human rights, participating in protests, or engaging in other forms of civic engagement. Their deaths may have resulted from actions by state actors, non-state actors or due to the volatile environments in which they operated.

Survivors: This refers to individuals whose rights were infringed upon and lived to tell their stories. These individuals faced challenges such as harassment, imprisonment, violence or other forms of persecution due to their involvement in advocacy, activism or other civil engagements.

Harassment: This is the persistent and unwanted behaviour directed at individuals or groups who are engaged in exercising their civil rights and freedom. This behaviour is often intended to intimidate, silence or deter individuals from exercising their civic rights.

Civic Space: This refers to the conditions that dictate the extent to which individuals within a society can exercise their fundamental rights of association, assembly and expression.



Nigerian media coverage of civic space infringements (January - December 2023)

WSCIJ monitored reports on media coverage of civic space infringements from thirty-two (32) Nigerian media outlets between January - December 2023. They are: national dailies (*The Punch*, *Daily Independent*, *Leadership*, *The Guardian*, *ThisDay*, *Tribune*, *Vanguard*, *Blueprint* and *Business Day*); online news platforms (*BBC Pidgin*, *Champion*, *Cross River Watch*, *Daily Nigerian*, *Daily Post*, *Daily Report Nigeria*, *Daily Trust*, *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 *WikkiTimes*); and broadcast organisations (*Channels TV*, *Africa Independent Television [AIT]*, *TV360* and *Nigerian Television Authority [NTA]*).

Disaggregated data on the 134 news stories published/aired by the 32 media organisations on civic space infringements show that online media is the dominant platform where stories on civic space infringements were reported with 62 (46%); while national dailies, published 39 (29%); and the broadcast organisations, published 33 (25%).

Media organisations monitored



Nigerian media coverage of civic space infringements (January - December 2023)

Print 	39
TV 	33
Online 	62
Total	134

Figure 1: Nigerian Media Coverage of Civic Space Infringements (January - December 2023)



Incidents of civic space infringements spike during elections

The year (2023) under review was the election year in Nigeria and it witnessed several cases of civic space infringements by state and non-state actors, particularly the months of the general elections (February and March); and November (the month of off-cycle election). Findings reveal that February, the month of the presidential election, had the highest number of reported incidents, totalling 32 (22%) out of the 134 occurrences. Again, March, the month of the governorship election in some states across the country followed closely with 28 (19%) out of the 134 incidents. Similarly, November, which is the month of off cycle elections in Imo, Kogi and Bayelsa states also saw a significant number of infringements, with 20 (14%) incidents.

Furthermore, a critical incident analyses of reported civic space infringements by state and non-state actors during electioneering campaign and actual election days buttress the finding from content analysis. For instance, on 21 February 2023, [Tribune newspaper](#) reported that Taiwo Yishau, a cameraman with *Daily Trust* was attacked by hoodlums and beaten mercilessly at the Teslim Balogun Stadium, venue of the grand finale rally of the All Progressives Congress (APC) Presidential Campaign (*emphasis ours*), despite carrying the press tag issued.

These reported incidents suggest that political actors and elections are key drivers of civic space infringements because February was the peak of electioneering campaigns and was also the month of the presidential election.

Again, [The Punch](#) reported on 25 February 2023 (the presidential election day) that its reporter, Gbenga Oloniniran, who was on election duty and taking snapshots of a scene where policemen were arresting some youths at a polling unit in Port Harcourt was swooped on and arrested by a team of policemen. In addition, [Peoples Gazette](#), an online newspaper reported on 25 February 2023 that a mob of party supporters attacked its female reporter, Adebola Ajayi, while she was on election duty in Lagos taking photographs to document the process in Orile-Oshodi ward. They briefly confiscated her mobile phone and erased all the photos and videos she had captured.

These reported incidents suggest that political actors and elections are key drivers of civic space infringements because

February was the peak of electioneering campaigns and was also the month of the presidential election. In addition, the civic space was not spared of infringements off election months as September and April recorded a significant number of incidents with 15 (12%) and 11 (9%) respectively out of the 134 cases reported. While October followed with seven (7), that is, that is, six percent (6%) incidents, January and July recorded five (5), that is, three point five percent (3.5%) incidents each. Also, August and May experienced fewer incidents with four (4), that is, three percent (3%), and three (3), that is, two percent (2%) respectively out of the 134 cases reported. June and December stood out with the fewest incidents two (2) cases of infringements, which accounts for one percent (1%) out of 134 cases reported. These shows that civic space infringement in Nigeria is on a continuum spanning across all the months of the year, but heaviest during election months.

Incidents of civic space infringement by months

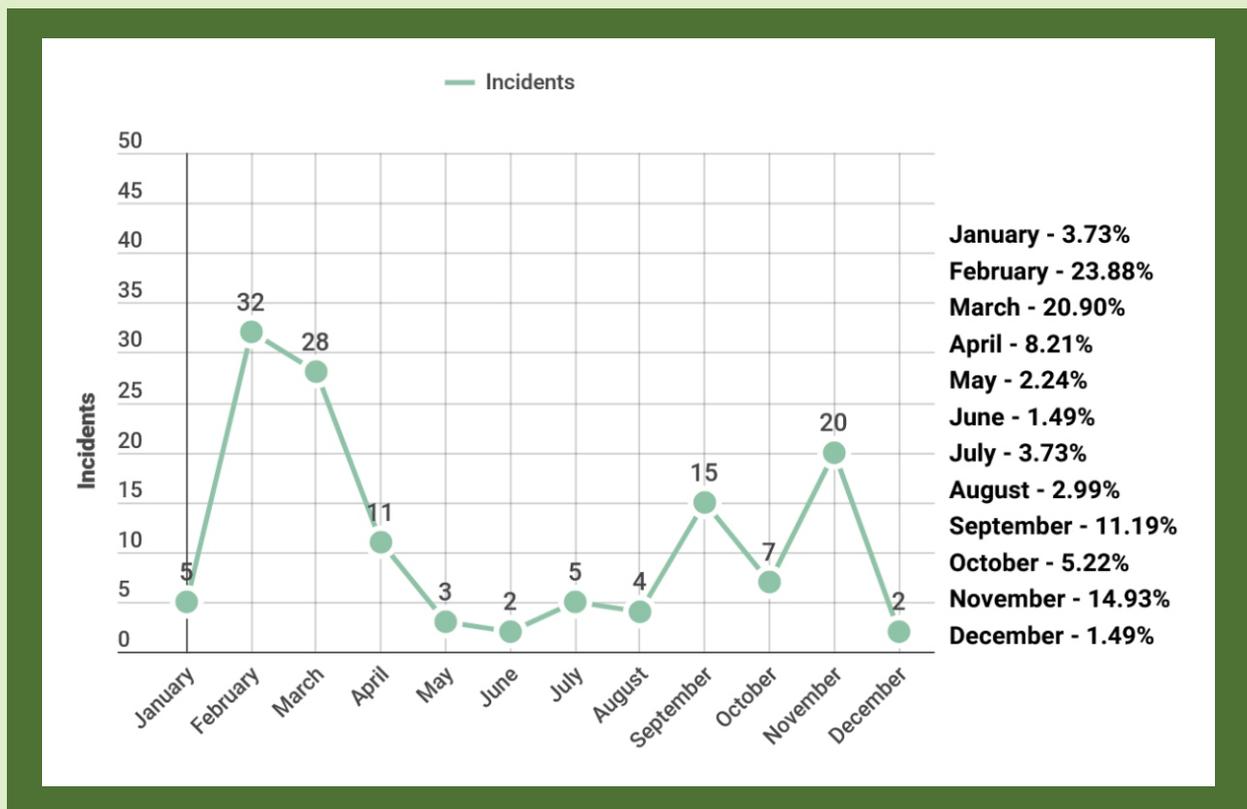


Figure 2: Incidents of Civic Space Infringement by Month (January - December 2023)



Is Lagos the Centre of civic space infringement?

Looking at incidents of civic space infringement by states across Nigeria, Lagos topped the list as it had the highest number of reported cases of infringements with 29 (21.64%) incidents; next is Rivers State, 16 (11.94%); Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, 13 (9.7%); Imo has 11 (8.21%) while Kano state recorded 10 (7.46%). Kaduna, Bayelsa, and Akwa Ibom states recorded 5 (3.73%) each out of the 134 total occurrences. States with relatively low occurrences are Anambra, Borno, Delta, Edo, Ogun, and Osun with two (2), that is, one point four nine percent (1.49%) each; while Abia, Ebonyi, Ondo, and Oyo had three (3), that is, two point two four percent (2.24%) incidents each out of the 134 total occurrences. Also, Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Cross River, Enugu, Gombe, Katsina, Kwara, Kogi, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Taraba states recorded one (1), that is, zero point seven five percent (0.75%) incident each, while there were four instances of reports of infractions in multiple states, that is, two point nine six percent (2.96%) instances.

With Lagos emerging at the top based on the latest findings, it suggests a concerning escalation of repression compared to when it ranked second in 2022 based on the [media monitoring report](#) of civic space infractions in Nigeria, titled '*Hushed voices and the media's defence of the civic space*', published by the WSCIJ.



Arise TV Cameraman, Opeyemi Adenibun with facial injuries after suffering attack while on election duty in Lagos.
Source: Arise News Facebook page

Incidents of civic space infringement by state

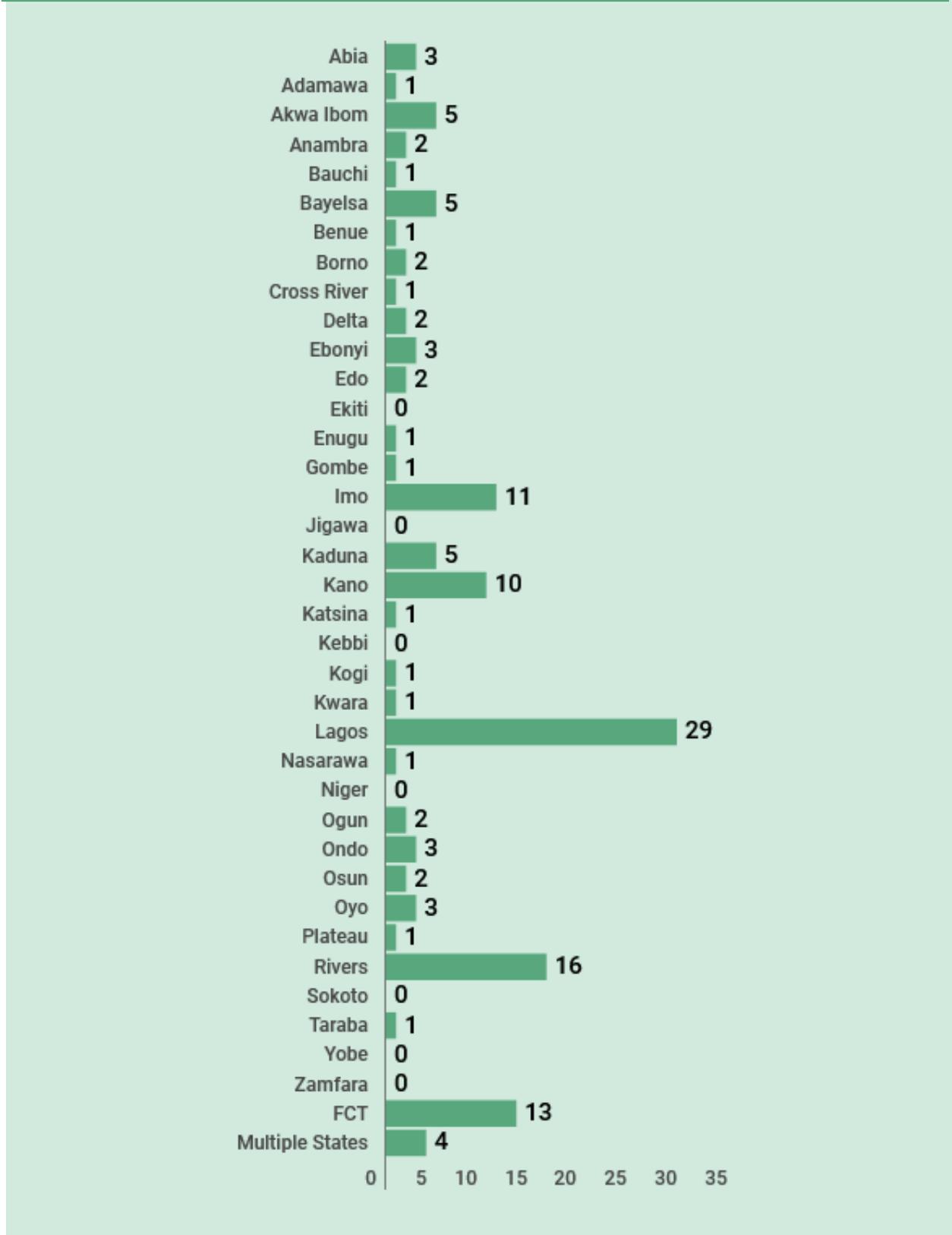


Figure 2: Incidents of Civic Space Infringement by state



Violent infringements are dominant

Violent infringements represent a dominant form in the shrinking civic space, comprising over 86 (64%), while the non-violent forms represent a significant portion, being 48 (36%) of the total observed 134 violations.

This suggests a civic space plagued with aggression and intimidation, which curtail civic freedoms. This prevalence of violence as a tactic deployed by both state and non-state actors poses significant challenges to the civic space.

Civic space infringements		
Form of Infringement	Incidents	Percentage of Total Incidents
Violent 	86	64%
Non-violent 	48	36%
Total	134	100%

Figure 4: Forms of Civic Space Infringements

Violent infringements

Violent infringements: From data collected and analysed, assaults which comprise 30 (35%) of the reported 86 incidents, represent the most prevalent form of violence, with cases of physical harm inflicted on media workers, protesters and voters who want to exercise their civic franchise.

Different civic space infringements monitored show that lives were lost as fatalities were recorded in 17 (20%) instances. Again, teargassing used for dispersing crowds or suppressing dissent, accounted for 14 (16%) cases of the reported incidents. There were also nine (9), that is, 10% of cases involving threats.

A specific example was reported in [The Punch Newspaper](#) on 6 February 2023. According to the report, *“The Ondo State Police Command ... warned residents of the state against any convergence of*

protest. The police command gave this warning following the residents' plan to stage a protest over the incessant scarcity of fuel and naira notes rocking the country.”

Different civic space infringements monitored show that lives were lost as fatalities were recorded in 17 (20%) instances.

Other violent forms of infringement, which include bombing of polling units, theft of equipment, and invasion among others comprise six (6), that is, seven per cent (7%) of the 86 reported incidents. Also, abductions accounted for five (5), that is, six per cent (6%); while a similar number faced being shot at, also constituting five (5), that is, six per cent (6%) of the 86 incidents.

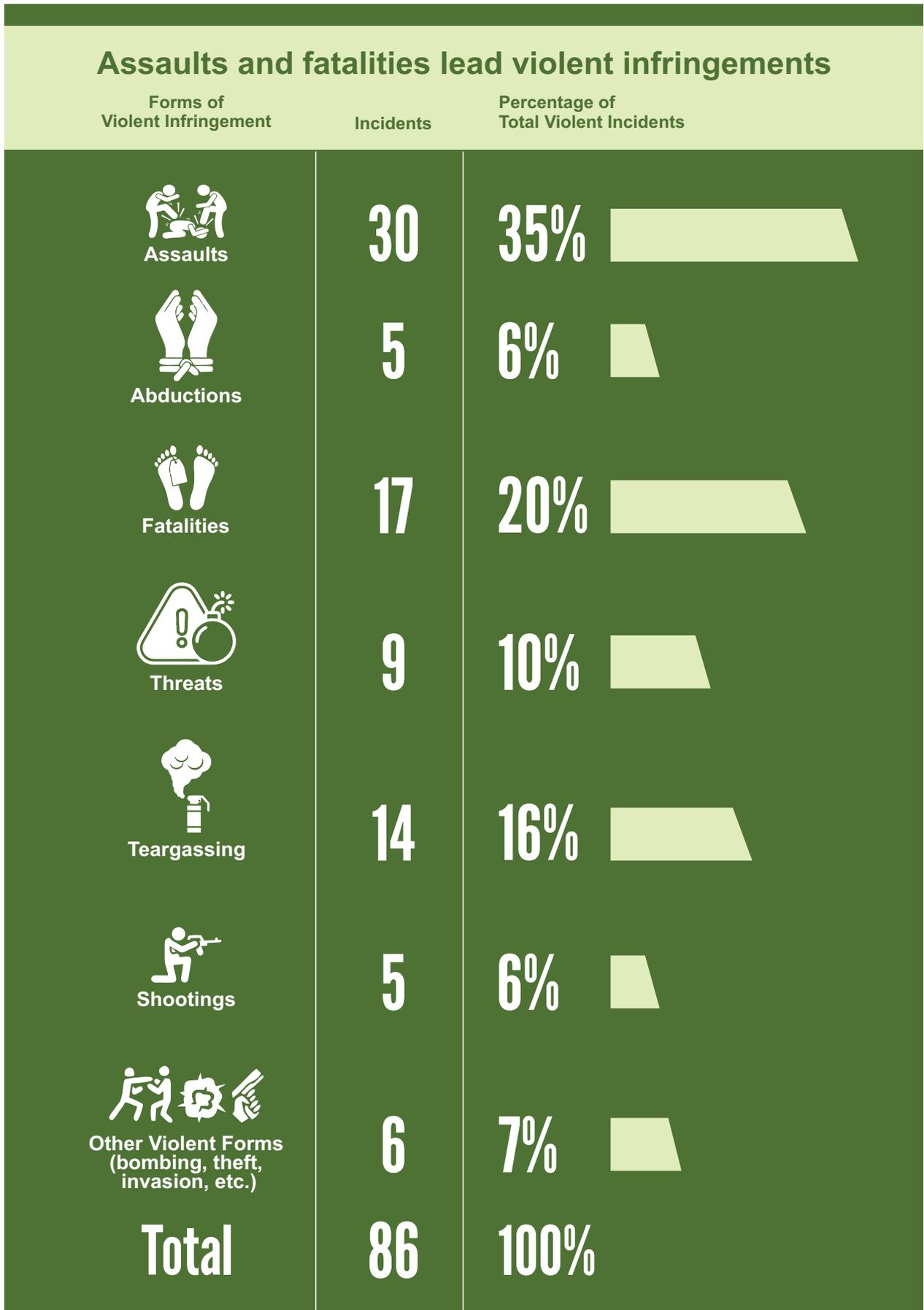


Figure 5: Forms of Violent Infringement



Journalists get barred from duties and citizens arrested

Majority of the non-violent infringements manifested as journalists being barred from carrying out their duties, with 13 (27%) instances out of 48 non-violent infringements. For instance, some “*Journalists seeking to visit the site of the collapsed seven-storey building in Banana Island, Lagos State ... [were] denied access to the estate. The reporters from various media houses including The Punch, Channels TV, TVC, Arise, Guardian, and others, ... [were denied entry]...*” reported [Channels Television](#) on 13 April 2023.

Also, there were nine (9) that is nineteen percent (19%) instances of arrest of citizens who were protesting and some media workers who were in the line of duties. In addition, individuals (journalists and other citizens) facing charges constitute seven (7), that is, 15% cases, while five (5), that is, 10% were instances of detention of journalists and other citizens.

Other tactics employed by both state and non-state actors to suppress dissenting voices and shrink the civic space include the demolition of broadcast station buildings. An example of this was reported by [Africa Independent Television \(AIT\)](#) on 4 September 2023. According to the

report, “*The Rivers State Government shutdown the operations of Africa Independent Television (AIT), and Raypower FM in Port Harcourt... in an... operation by telecommunications engineers contracted by the State Government who were accompanied by armed security operatives. The contractors disconnected the wave guard from the antenna on the mast while riggers were seen dismantling the mast*”.

Other tactics employed by both state and non-state actors to suppress dissenting voices and shrink the civic space include the demolition of broadcast station buildings.

Also, dispersal of protesting crowds, which were reported six (6) times, accounting for 13% of the total incidents, is another tactic employed to silence the voice of civic actors. For instance, [Vanguard Newspaper](#) on 22 November 2023 reported that, “*Operatives of Kano Police dispersed...protesters who took to the streets of the ancient city to stage [a] protest against the contradicting Appeal Court judgment*”. Again, harassment accounts for two (2), that is, four percent (6%) of the

reported cases, while imposition of sanctions and fines by the NBC occurred four (4) times, which is eight per cent (8%) of the non-violent forms of infringement on the civic space.

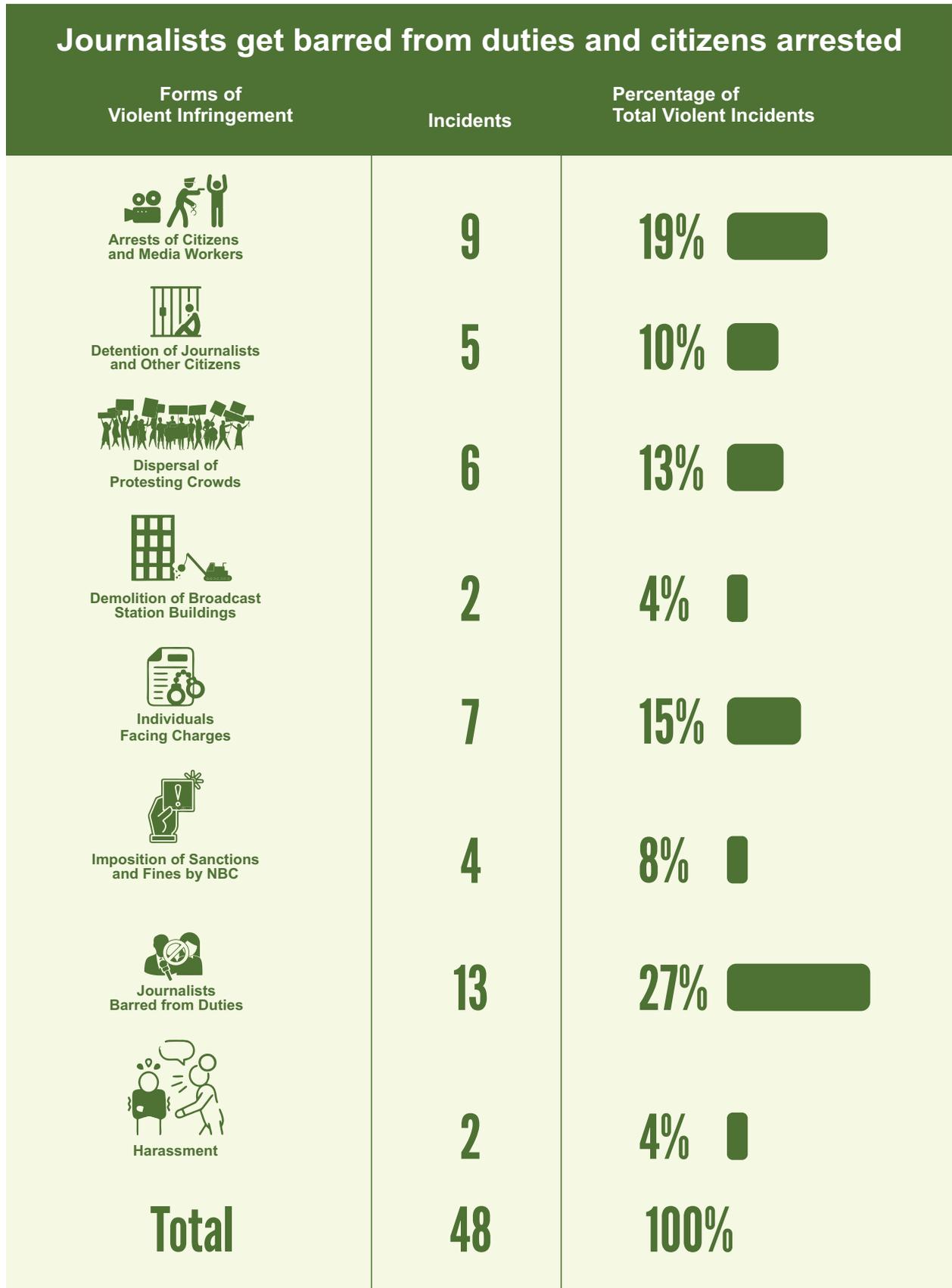


Figure 6: Forms of non-violent infringement

Perpetrators at a glance:

*Police, politicians
account for almost 70%
of infringements.*





The police and politicians lead infringements on journalism and the civic space

Data on perpetrators of civic space infringements reveal that most infringements, 109 (81%) cases were committed by groups. This suggests that organised entities, whether state actors or non-state actors, come in groups to perpetrate violations against citizens' and journalists' civil liberties. Again, individuals were responsible for 21 (16%) cases of the infringements, indicating that while group actions constitute the majority, individual actions still significantly impact civil liberties.

This result brings to the fore the agency of individuals in the declining civic space in contrast to the common assumption that they are generally survivors or victims of civic space infringements. Finally, only four (4) cases was by an institution, NBC – a government regulatory agency.

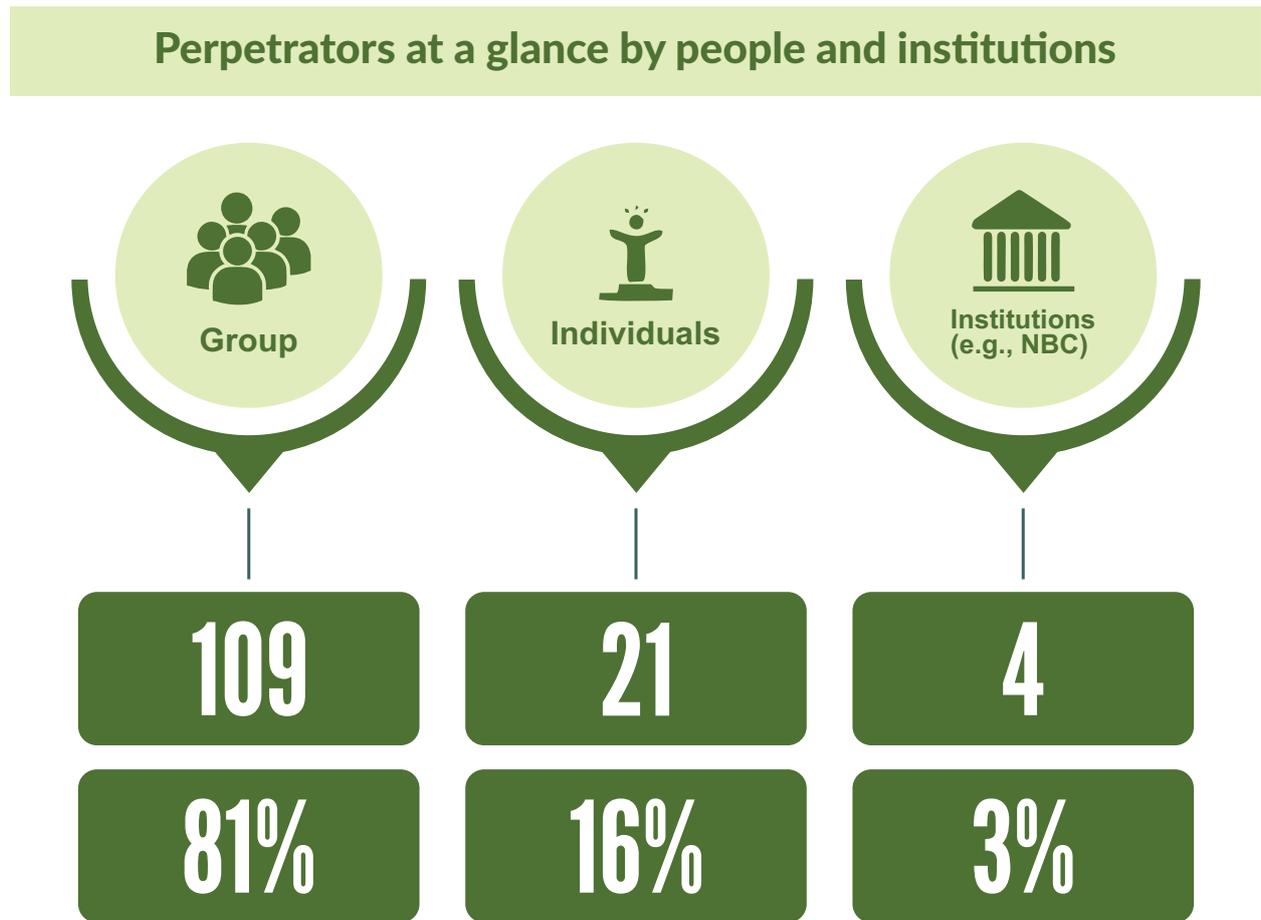


Figure 7: Perpetrators at a glance by people and institution



State actors lead infringements

A binary analysis of the perpetrators of civic space infringement, shows that state actors led with 91 (68%) incidents and non-state actors were responsible for 43 (32%); out of the 134 cases of civic infringements. This indicates that governmental bodies or agencies are majorly the perpetrators civic space infringements.

State and non-state actors as perpetrators

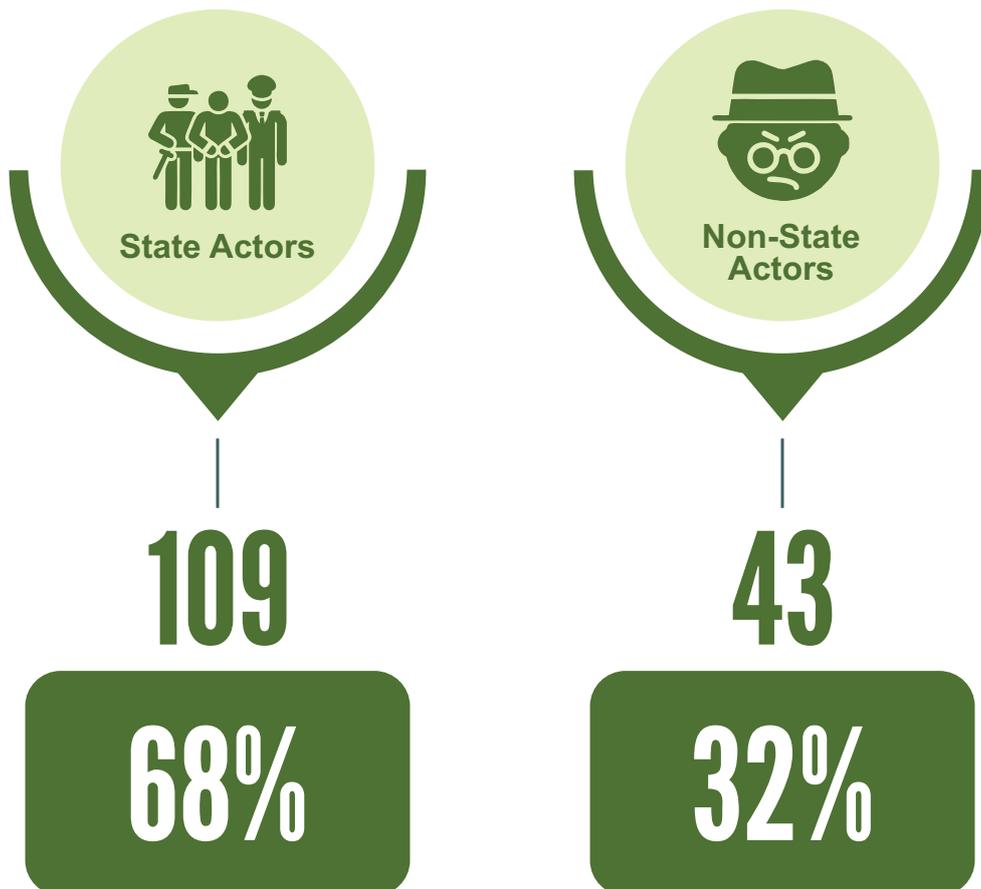


Figure 8: State and Non-State Actors as Perpetrators



Nigeria Police tops list of state actors infringing on the civic space

A disaggregated data on state actors who were perpetrators of civic space infringements, show that the Nigeria Police, which belongs to the executive arm of government and tasked with upholding law and order stood out with 45 (49%) instances, that is, nearly half of the 91 instances. This suggests not just a declining civic space but also a decline in rule of law and democratic values. The findings also indicate that some influential politicians actively infringe on the civic space, with 18 instances, representing 20% of the total.

Excerpts from a [Blueprint](#) news story on 26 November 2023 highlighted how an influential

The Nigeria Police, which belongs to the executive arm of government and tasked with upholding law and order stood, out with 45 (49%) instances that is nearly half of the 91 instances. This suggests not just a declining civic space but also a decline in rule of law/democratic values.

politician in Niger state was caught in the act. According to this story, the Commissioner of Homeland Security, Major General Bello Mohammed Abdullahi (rtd) attacked Mustapha Batsari, a Voice of America (VOA) reporter inside Government House, Minna. Again, the Nigerian Army which should be protecting the territorial integrity of the nation, was found to have been responsible for six (6) instances, that is, seven per cent (7%) of rights abuses, particularly during protests.

This is closely followed by the electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) with five (5) instances representing six per cent (6%) of the 91 cases of civic space infringements by state actors. Specifically, on 18 March 2023, [Independent Nigeria Newspaper](#) reported that *at Polling Unit 048 Ijaiye, Ojokoro, Lagos, some INEC officials stopped journalists from covering the exercise even while voting had commenced at the Polling Unit claiming that they were instructed not to allow media coverage, especially those with cameras.*

Also, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) undermined the principles of freedom of expression in a democracy as findings showed four (4) cases of censorship, with four per cent (4%) of the 91 cases of state actors civic space infringements for the period studied. According to [The Punch](#) and [This Day](#) newspapers, NBC *fined Arise News, TVC and Channels TV N2 million each for alleged breach of NBC codes in the countdown to the 2023 general election; and sanctioned no fewer than 25 broadcast stations for alleged non-adherence to extant broadcast laws.*

Apart from the Nigerian Police, other security agencies found to have infringed on the civic space include the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) which accounted for four (4), that is, four per cent (4%), Department of State Services (DSS), two point five (2.5) instances which is two per cent (2%), National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Federal Road Service Corps (FRSC) as well as the Nigeria Customs Service with one (1), that is, one per cent (1%) instance each.

NBC fined Arise News, TVC and Channels TV N2 million each for alleged breach of NBC codes in the countdown to the 2023 general election; and sanctioned no fewer than 25 broadcast stations for alleged non-adherence to extant broadcast laws.

Also, the judiciary accounts for two (2), that is, two point five per cent (2.5%) of the infractions, while a State House of Assembly accounted for one (1), that is, one per cent (1%). A university management recorded one (1) instance which represents one (1%) the state actors infringing on civil rights. According to [The Punch](#), *Benue State University, Makurdi slammed a one-month suspension on medical students from 200 Level to 600 Level following a 25 October protest by the students over alleged poor accommodation and infrastructure.*

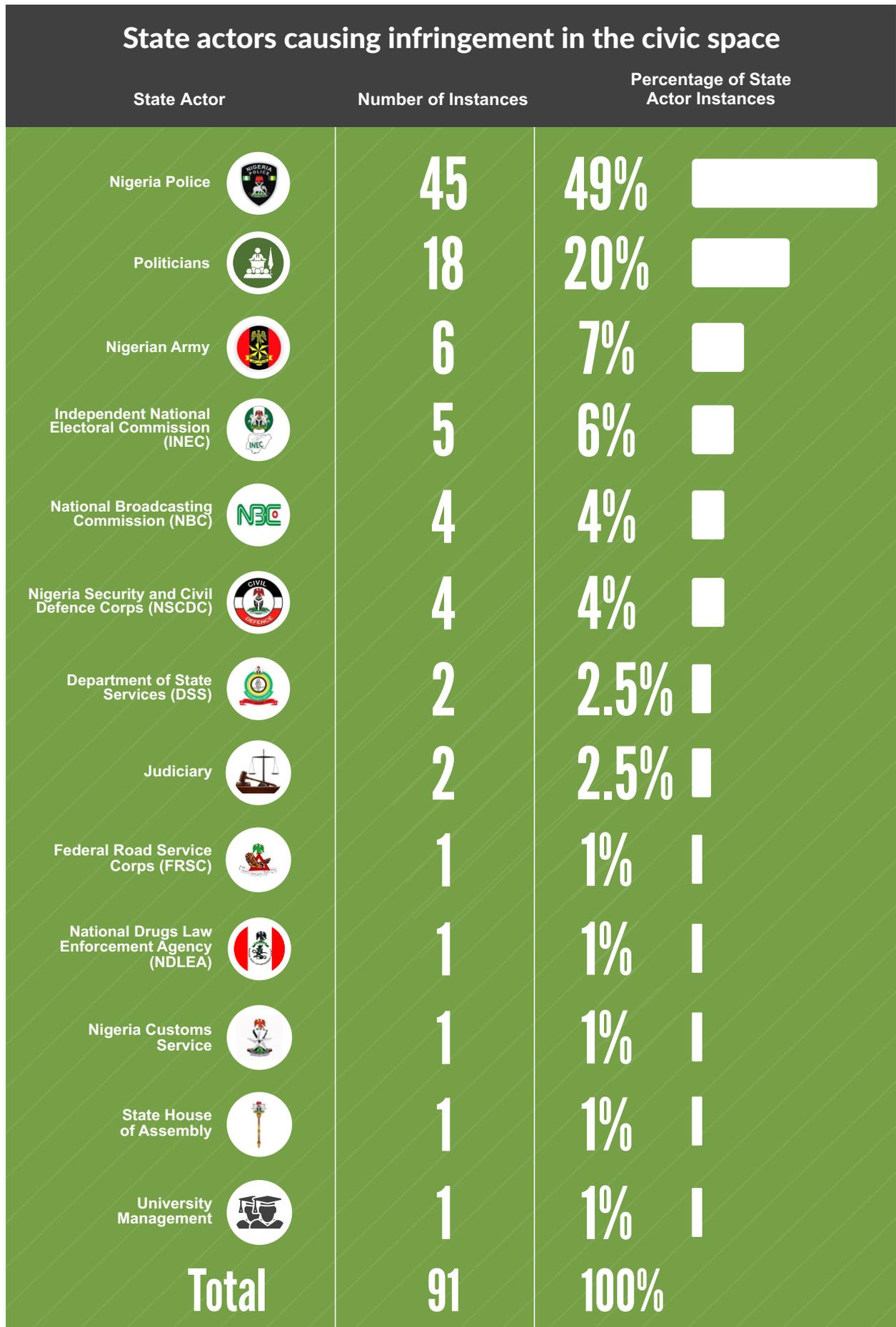


Figure 9: State actors causing infringement in the civic space



Non-State actors' role in civic unrest

Out of the 43 instances of non-state actors' infringement on the civic space, evidence shows that hoodlums (comprising louts, hooligans and thugs) constitute the majority 34, that is, 79% of non-state actor perpetrators of civic space infringements. Again, the data shows that there were only two (2), that is, 5% instances of mob involvement, while religious extremists and unidentified persons had one (1), that is, 2% and two (2), that is, 5% instances respectively. The final category of non-state actors labelled "Others," includes security officials of residential estates, unspecified individuals and other citizens; and they account for four (4), that is, 9% instances of non-state actors civic space infringements.

On mobs, [Leadership Newspaper](#) of 28 February 2023 reported that “Angry mob ... attacked a reporter of the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), Mrs Pauline Kuje Vana, while covering the fire outbreak at the popular Maiduguri Monday Market in Borno State capital city. The journalist was attacked and beaten alongside her crew in an attempt to file a live report on the fire incident at the market.”

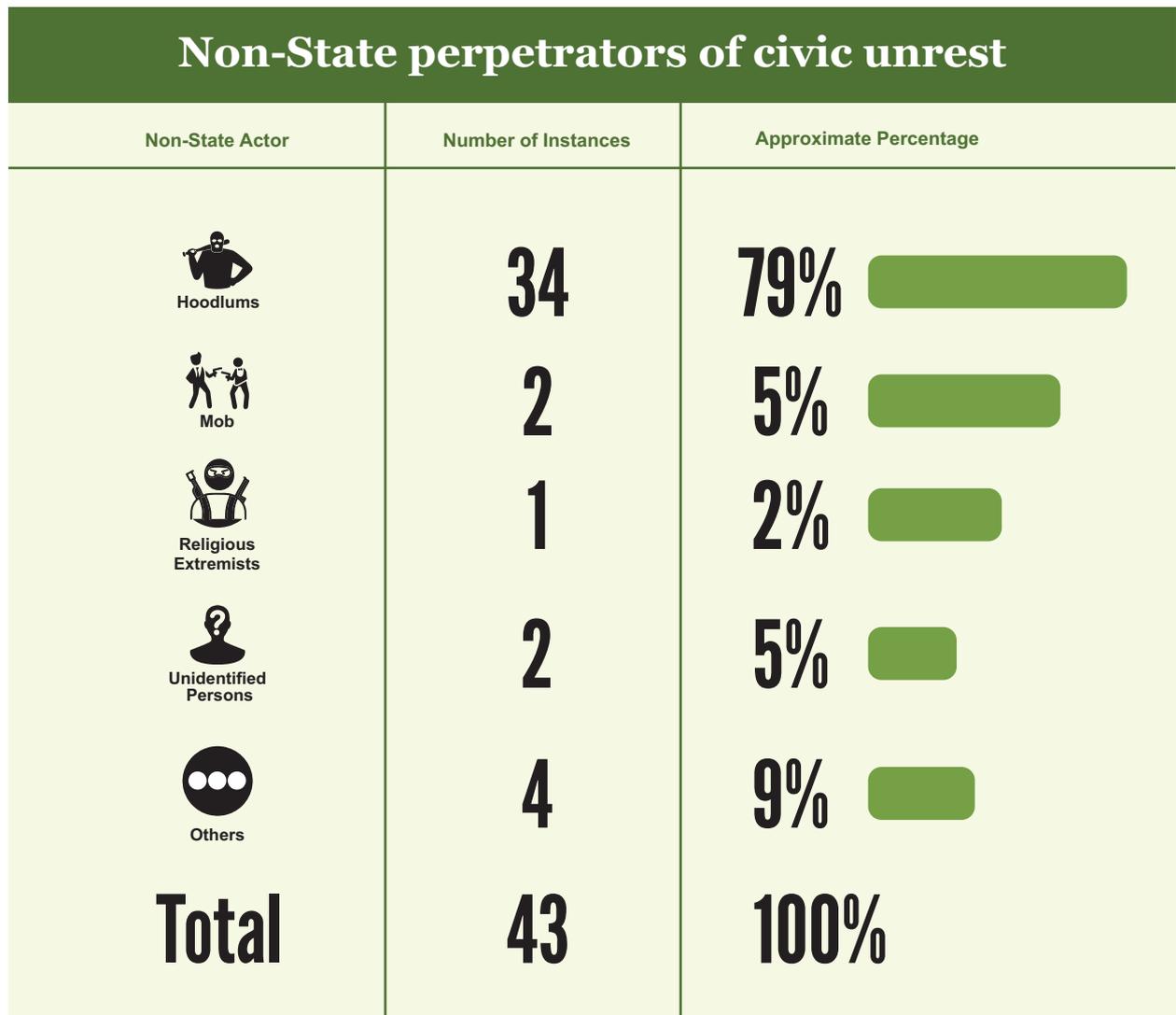


Figure 10: Non-State perpetrators of civic unrest



Voices under threat:

*Citizens and journalists
face escalating attacks
on civic freedoms*





The Nigerian civic space is safe for no one

Among those affected, citizens represent the largest group, constituting approximately 58 (43%) out of a total of 134 cases. Journalists and media organisations also feature prominently, with 44 (33%) of the cases and eight (8), that is, six (6%) of the cases respectively. Interestingly, politicians had their share of attacks accounting for 10, that is, eight (8%) of the cases. A critical incident analysis of the case of a politician was reported on [Channels Television](#) on 30 October 2023. According to Channels Television, “Police operatives in Rivers state fired teargas and water cannons at Rivers State Governor, Siminalayi Fubara while leading his supporters in protest on his on his way to the Rivers State House of Assembly.

Other populations violated as a result of civic space infringements include students, union members, and other individuals which constitute 14 (10%).

Groups that are most violated

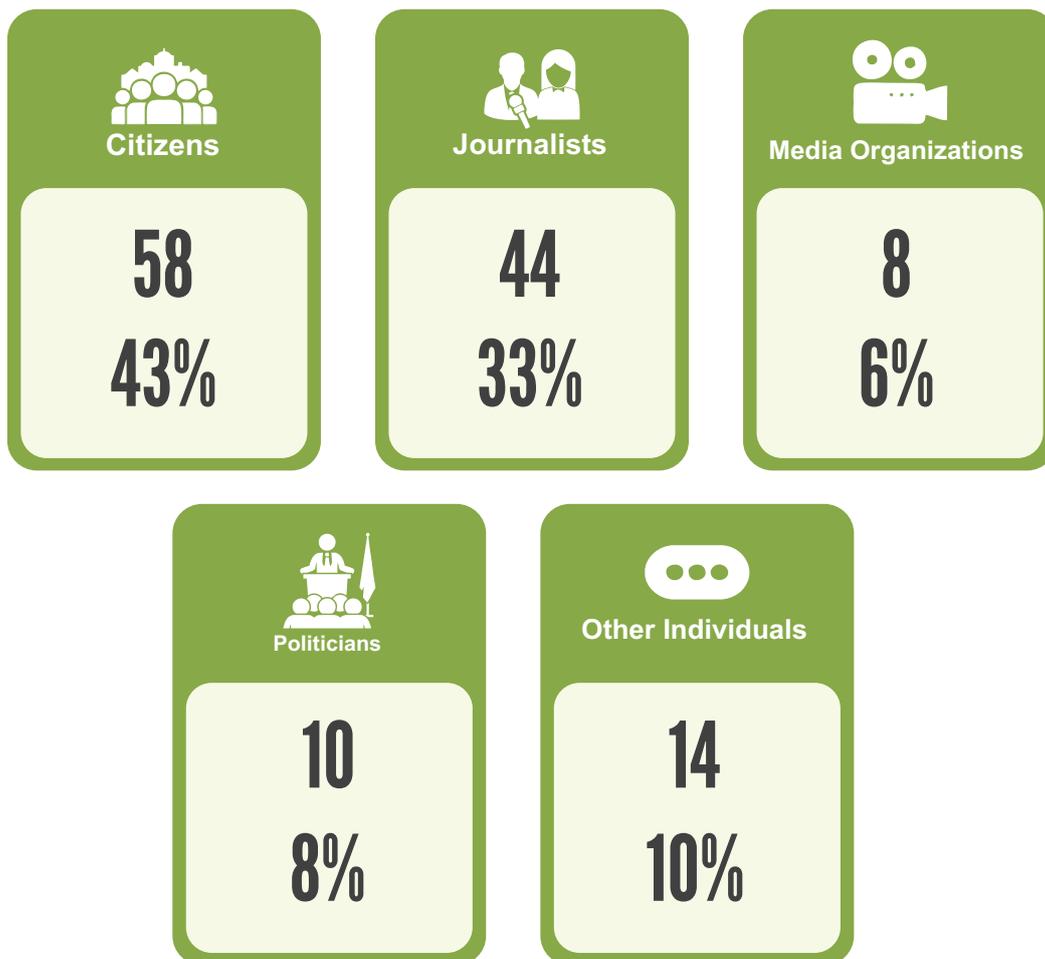


Figure 11: Groups that are most targeted for violations



Media reports are often unclear about the gender of survivors/victims

A gender perspective on victims/survivors of civic space infringements show that males represent the majority, comprising approximately 42 (31%) of the cases while, females account for about 10 (8%) out of the 134 cases. Although this gender disaggregation is indicative of the gender dimension, a significant portion which is 82 (61%) of the reported cases, falls under the category of unspecified gender, which could indicate either a lack of or missing gender information (data/record) or that they were cases where gender might not be applicable or relevant.

Gender of victims/survivors

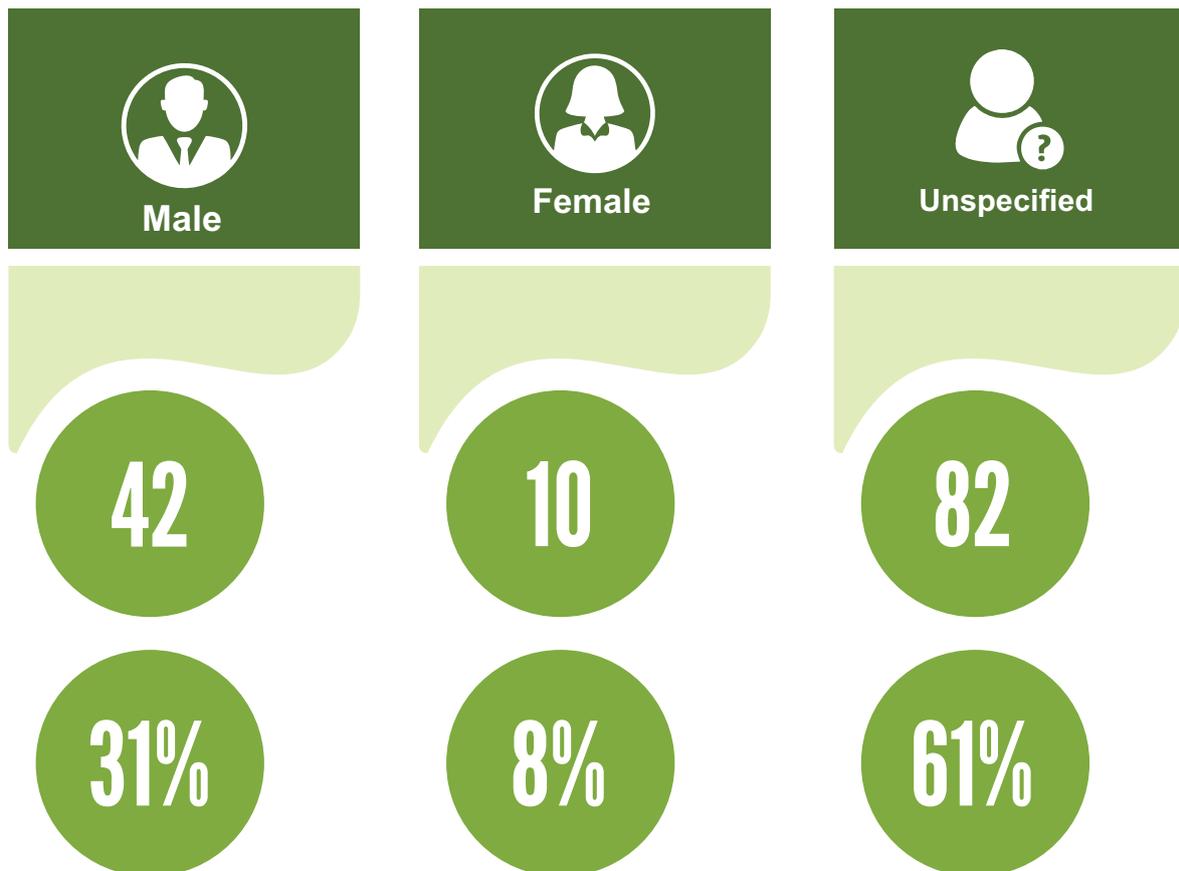


Figure 12: Gender of victims/survivors



Protest grounds and polling units are infringement scenes

The findings reveal that the most common site of incidents of civic space infringement is the protest ground, with 35 (26%) of the 134 cases, reflecting the inherent dangers journalists as well as citizens are exposed to when at protest grounds. This also suggests that spaces designated for public activities are often sites of conflict and tension, where individuals' rights to assemble and express dissenting views may be questioned or attacked.

Following closely, polling units represent 34 (25.4%) of the locations where civic space incidents happen, indicating the heightened tensions and vulnerabilities surrounding electoral processes and venues of campaigns and polling units. The court premises and political campaign grounds each account for 10 (7.5%) incidents of the total cases.

Media houses recorded nine (9) incidents, highlighting that journalists may not be safe even within their workplaces. Similarly, the INEC office and law enforcement offices (including police stations) recorded eight (8) and five (5) incidents respectively, accounting for six percent (6%) and three point seven (3.7%).

Media houses recorded nine (9) incidents, highlighting that journalists may not be safe even within their workplaces.

Other notable locations include incidents covering fire events or building collapses, with four (4) cases each, representing three percent (3%) of the total. The data also indicates that office of the National Broadcasting Commission, government houses, and bank premises, which recorded four (4) incidents three percent (3%) each and three (3) incidents two point two (2.2%), respectively.

Despite being less common, incidents in government houses (2 incidents, 1.5%), homes (1 incident, 0.7%), religious grounds (1 incident, 0.7%), school premises (1 incident, 0.7%), state houses of assembly (1 incident, 0.7%), national assembly (1 incident, 0.7%), and press briefings (1 incident, 0.7%) also contribute to the overall statistics. These figures remind us that risks can arise in even the most unexpected places.

Scenes of civic space infringements		
Scene of Infringement	Number of Cases	Percentage of Total Incidents (%)
 Protest grounds	35	26%
 Polling units	34	25.4%
 Court Premises	10	7.5%
 Political campaign ground	10	7.5%
 Media House	9	7%
 INEC Office	8	6%
 Law enforcement office (Police Stations and others)	5	3.7%
 Covering incidents like fire or building collapse	4	3%
 Office of the National Broadcasting Commission	4	3%
 Government House	6	4.5%
 Bank premises	3	2.2%
 Home	1	0.7%
 Religious ground	1	0.7%
 School premises	1	0.7%
 State House of Assembly	1	0.7%
 National assembly	1	0.7%
 Press briefing	1	0.7%
Total	134	100

Figure 14: Scene of all civic space infringements



Media workers get harassed the most at polling units and campaign grounds

Disaggregated data presents a concerning overview of the various scenes of infringement faced by media workers, highlighting the risky conditions under which they operate in the country. Out of the 41 cases on civic space infringements that media workers suffered in various places, the highest number of incidents of infringements happen at polling units, with 14 (34%) of reported cases. This suggests that the electoral process and venues present potential threats to journalists' safety and rights of freedom speech, from where they derive their reportorial rights. A specific example was [International Centre for Investigative Reporting \(ICIR\)](#) story of 26 February 2023, which stated that *“Political thugs attacked the ... Executive Director, Dayo Aiyetan, at the Agwan Fulani Town Hall, Gwagwalada town, Abuja, on Saturday, February 25, while he was covering the Presidential and National Assembly elections. They beat him, tore his cloth and dispossessed him of his phone, car key, purse and a pouch containing his debit cards, Nigeria and US driver's licenses, and other items.”*

Following closely is the political campaign ground, which constitutes 5 (12%) cases of infringements. Here, journalists often find themselves in high-pressure environments, where political tensions can escalate, compromising their safety.

“Political thugs attacked the ... Executive Director, Dayo Aiyetan, at the Agwan Fulani Town Hall, Gwagwalada town, Abuja, on Saturday, February 25, while he was covering the Presidential and National Assembly elections. They beat him, tore his cloth and dispossessed him of his phone, car key, purse and a pouch containing his debit cards, Nigeria and US driver's licenses, and other items.”

Also, court premises represent a significant location for infringements, which ranges from prevention from covering court proceedings to being beaten, that journalists experienced in the line of duty; and four (4), that is, 10% of such that occurred in court premises were reported in the media in 2023.

Similarly, both the offices of the National Broadcasting Commission and protest grounds each account for four (4), that is, 10% of infringements. These locations, integral to democratic processes, should be safeguarded to allow journalists to operate without fear of intimidation or harassment.

Media houses are also not immune, with three (3) that is, seven (7%) of the infringements. This statistic raises concerns about the threats journalists face even within their own organisations, where they should feel secure.

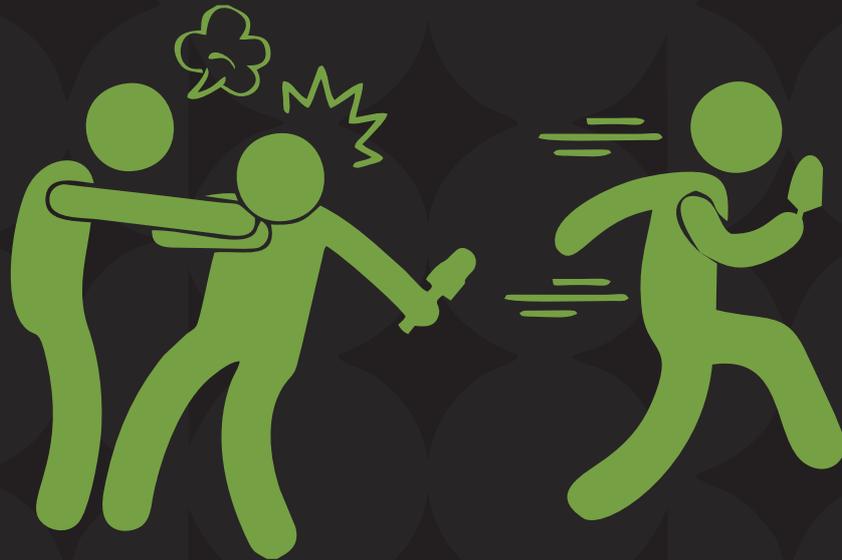
Also, covering incidents such as fires or building collapses represents two (2) that is, five (5%) of infringements.

Other locations include the INEC office, the State House of Assembly, the National Assembly, during press briefings, and the Government House, each contributing to the remaining percentages of infringement incidents. Specifically, these sites account for one (1) that is case each, representing 2.4% of the total for each location, illustrating that infringements can occur across a range of settings where journalists are expected to fulfil their duty to inform the public.

Scene of Infringement for media workers		
Scene of Infringement	Number of Cases	Percentage of Total Incidents (%)
 Polling units	14	34%
 Political campaign ground	5	12%
 Court Premises	4	10%
 Office of the National Broadcasting Commission	4	10%
 Protest Grounds	4	10%
 Media House	3	7%
 Covering incidents like fire or building collapse	2	5%
 INEC Office	1	2.4%
 State House of Assembly	1	2.4%
 National assembly	1	2.4%
 Press briefing	1	2.4%
 Government House	1	2.4%
Total	41	100%

Figure 15: Scene of Infringement for media workers

90% of attacks on journalists happen in the line of duty





90% of attacks on journalists happen in the line of duty

According to data earlier stated on page 27 of this report, Journalists are one of the most violated groups in terms of civic space infringements as they experienced 44 attacks during the reporting period. Also, disaggregated data as shown on page 31 reveals that journalists were attacked 41 times while performing their duties. This figure highlights the heightened vulnerability journalists face specifically in the line of duty, where they are directly targeted for simply fulfilling their professional responsibilities. These attacks are a clear indication of the hostile environment in which journalists operate, particularly during sensitive periods like elections or major civic events.

The fact that the majority of attacks—over 90%—occurred while journalists were working highlights the risks inherent in gathering information, holding authorities accountable, and ensuring the public's right to know. This implies that for every 10 attacks on journalists, 9 occur while they are performing their duties.

“

This implies that for every 10 attacks on journalists, 9 occur while they are performing their duties.

”

This reality not only affects individual journalists but also threatens the broader principles of press freedom and civic space, as assaults on the press can lead to self-censorship and a less informed public.

Freedom under attack

Data from the news reports monitored were categorised under (a) freedom of expression, which manifested as attacks on media houses and journalists including imposing sanctions or fines on media outlets; (b) infringements on freedom of association and peaceful assembly manifest as violent disruption of protests or rallies, unjustly restricting rights, arrest or detention of peaceful protesters, and causing physical harm to protesters; and (c) violations of freedom of participation which include attacks targeted at voters and citizens performing their civic duties.

Out of the 134 cases of infringements, freedom of expression emerged as the most prominently impacted, representing approximately 62 (46%) of cases. Next is freedom of peaceful assembly, representing approximately 41 (31%) of cases. Freedom of participation accounts for about 26 (19%) of the total cases, reflecting challenges, restrictions and interferences which individuals face while engaging in civic processes such as elections or exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. However, freedom of association ranked lowest with five (5) cases, that is, four percent (4%).

Extent of freedom abuse		
Freedom infringed upon	Incidents	Percentage of Total Incidents (%)
Association 	5	4% 
Expression 	62	46% 
Participation 	26	19% 
Peaceful Assembly 	41	31% 
Total	134	100%

Figure 15: Extent of freedom abuse



Summary

From January to December 2023, WSCIJ monitored 134 reports of incidents of civic space infringements across different media organisations in Nigeria including national dailies, online news platforms, and broadcast organisations. Overall, findings reveal civic space infringements in Nigeria, manifesting as abuses of journalists, citizens, activists, and other stakeholders in the civic space, and highlighting the challenges they face in maintaining an open civic space, particularly during election periods.

The analysis of the media coverage reveals that online media led the coverage with 62 stories, followed by national dailies with 39 stories and broadcast organisations with 33 stories. Civic space infringements peaked in February, March, and November, coinciding with election periods, highlighting the significant impact of political events on civil liberties. Lagos State recorded the highest number of incidents with 29, followed by Rivers State with 16, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with 13. Violent infringements, including assaults, fatalities, teargassing, threats, bombings, thefts, invasions, abductions and shootings constituted 64% of the incidents. Non-violent infringements included barring journalists, arrests, charges, detention, demolition of broadcast stations, crowd dispersals, harassment, and sanctions took the remaining 36%.

Also, perpetrators were primarily groups, with state actors leading in terms of the number of incidents, particularly the Nigeria Police, followed by politicians and the Nigerian Army while the non-state actors, mainly hoodlums, were also responsible for a significant portion of infringements.

On targets for violation, citizens, journalists, and media organisations were the most targeted groups, with males being the majority of victims while protest grounds and polling units were the most common locations for infringements, highlighting the risks faced by individuals who go out to exercise their civic rights and journalists covering the protest.



Recommendations

To protect the civic space, eliminate civic space infringements, and safeguard the democratic freedom needed for the media to perform its constitutional duties and for citizens to demand for accountability from duty bearers, there should be immediate and coordinated efforts from all stakeholders to ensure the protection of the civic space and elimination of civic space infringements in Nigeria. Below are some specific recommendations for various stakeholders.

Media organisations, journalists and journalism professional bodies:



Provide continuous training on safety for journalists to prepare them for hostile environments, especially during election periods.



Establish support systems for journalists facing threats or attacks, including legal aid and mental health resources.



Educate citizens about their constitutional rights and the legal avenues available for redress in case of infringements.



Work collaboratively to ensure that journalists have access to comprehensive insurance coverage. This insurance should encompass health, life, and disability coverage, specifically tailored to address the unique risks faced by journalists.



Prioritise the safety of their reporters by providing essential safety gear especially those covering high-risk beats.

Legislature



Review and amend relevant laws to explicitly protect journalists, media workers, and citizens' rights during elections and other national events.

INEC



Enhance regulations and guidelines for the conduct of elections, ensuring clear protocols for preventing and addressing civic space infringements for citizens who are performing their civic duty and to media workers in line of duty.

Security agencies



Refrain from excessive policing at civic events, such as protests, political campaign rallies, and elections, to prevent intimidation and potential conflicts. This will ensure a balanced approach that prioritises public safety while respecting citizens' rights to peaceful assembly and free expression.



Integrate comprehensive human rights training into training of recruits (Police, NSCDC, NDLEA, DSS) to reduce abuses.



Strengthen accountability within security agencies for acts of harassment and violence against journalists, ensuring that perpetrators face justice and that a culture of impunity is eradicated.



Promote community policing initiatives to build trust between law enforcement and citizens, ensuring better cooperation and understanding.

National Broadcasting Commission



Ensure that regulations are applied consistently and transparently without political bias to maintain credibility.



Train and retrain broadcasters on regulatory compliance to avoid breaches of broadcast codes.



Ensure fairness and equity in its regulation, especially in sanctioning broadcast stations. The NBC should address situations in which it is the accuser, prosecutor, judge and executor in its own cases.



Establish an independent oversight body to investigate breaches of NBC code. The body will comprise of stakeholders, including media professionals, legal experts, civil society representatives, and members of the public. This body would operate autonomously from the NBC to ensure impartiality and credibility in its investigations and decisions.

Civil Society Organisations



Enhance advocacy efforts to raise awareness about civic space issues and mobilise public support for reforms.



Collaborate more to share resources, information, and strategies for defending civic space.



Empower grassroots organisations to protect the civic space and promote civil rights.



Train journalists regularly on safety and empower those covering crises and dangerous assignments with the necessary resources.

Citizens



Participate in civic activities and engage with government processes constructively to eliminate infringements in the civic space.



Speak about and condemn attacks on civic space infringements, especially on journalists. Attacks on journalists cause self-censorship which hinder citizens' access to credible news from the media.



Conclusion

The data from this report highlights the persistent threats to civic space and media freedom in Nigeria, revealing a concerning pattern of infringements across diverse environments. Notably, protest grounds emerged as the most common site for civic space infringements, accounting for 26% of reported incidents, with polling units closely following at 25.4%. These statistics show the risks that citizens and journalists face in exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and participation in democratic processes.

For media workers, polling units present the greatest danger, with 34% of infringements occurring there, signaling the significant risks tied to election coverage. Also, infringements in media houses (7%) suggest that journalists are not safe even within their workplaces, further highlighting the hostile environment in which they operate. Overall, the report confirms that 90% of attacks on journalists happen while they are performing their professional duties, exposing the dangers inherent in seeking and disseminating information, especially during politically sensitive periods.

These findings illuminate the broader challenges to freedom of the press, civic rights, and democratic principles. They also reflect the multifaceted threats that journalists face, whether in courts, protest grounds, or while covering sensitive incidents. The frequent targeting of media personnel highlights the pressing need for interventions that protect journalists and safeguard the integrity of civic space.



Honouring bold voices who dared the odds and told stories that matter – The guards of the civic space

Investigative journalism lies at the heart of documenting and challenging the erosion of civic freedoms, a theme central to this report. Journalists face relentless pressures including intimidation, harassment and outright violence, yet many remain steadfast, committed to bringing important stories to light. These stories often expose systemic failures, hold power to account, and give voice to those who might otherwise remain unheard. The 18th Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting honours such courage and resilience, recognising journalists who refuse to be silenced despite operating in an increasingly hostile environment. Their work is a powerful reminder of the essential role a free press plays in safeguarding democracy and protecting the civic space, even when the cost is high.

On 9 December 2023, the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ) honoured ten investigative journalists at the 18th edition of its Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting in Abuja. The event recognised reporters who uncovered critical stories, addressing issues that matter most to Nigerians, often at significant personal risk.

Wouter Plomp, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Nigeria, represented by Jessica Odudu, Senior Adviser on political affairs, human rights, and communication at the Netherlands Embassy, delivered a goodwill message, emphasising the importance of investigative journalism in defending freedoms. She described the awards as an essential motivation for journalists, reaffirming the Embassy's dedication to supporting press freedom and tackling misinformation.



Award winners and judges at the 18th edition of the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting (WSAIR) held on Saturday 9 December 2023 in Abuja.



The winners of the awards were chosen from 244 entries spanning various media categories. Some notable winners included:

Kemi Busari of *Dubawa*, won the online category with his story “INVESTIGATION: 'Baba Aisha Herbal Medicine': The deadly concoction consumed by many Nigerians” for exposing the dangers of herbal concoctions.

Sharon Ijasan of *TVC News*, won in the TV category with her two-part story titled “Human trafficking sad realities of trafficked Nigerians in Libya, West Africa” which documented the harsh realities of human trafficking.

Lami Sadiq of *Daily Trust*, won in the print category for her investigative piece “Organ exploitation: How Abuja syndicate lured minor for kidney harvest”. Award recipients received plaques, certificates, laptops, cash prizes, and international travel opportunities. Commended finalists were also acknowledged for their significant contributions.



Jessica Odudu, Senior advisor on political affairs, human rights and communication, Netherlands Embassy in Nigeria, representative of Ambassador Wouter Plomp, delivering goodwill message, at the 18th edition of the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting (WSAIR) held on Saturday 9 December 2023 in Abuja



Winner of the online category at the 18th edition of the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting (WSAIR), Kemi Busari of Dubawa joining the awards event virtually



The ceremony also included the relaunch of the Civic Space Guard Project, a collaborative effort with the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID) supported by the Netherlands Embassy. This initiative aims to protect the civic space and support the work of journalists in addressing national issues.



Victor Asowata, cartoon editor, *The Will*, runner-up in the editorial cartoon category (right), Jessica Odudu, Senior advisor on political affairs, human rights and communication, Netherlands Embassy in Nigeria, representative of Ambassador Wouter Plomp (left), at the 18th edition of the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting (WSAIR) held on Saturday 9 December 2023 in Abuja



Sharon Ijasan, Senior Correspondent, TVC News, winner in the television category (right), receiving the prize from Abigail Ogwezzy-Ndisika, Professor of mass communication, University of Lagos (left), at the 18th edition of the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting (WSAIR) held on Saturday 9 December 2023 in Abuja



Saturday 9 December 2023



5:00pm (WAT)



Abuja

#WSAIR2023

Supported by



Kingdom of the Netherlands





Order of events

Welcome protocol/National Anthem
Deji Badmus and Kimberly Nwachukwu, Compere

Introduction of guests
Compere

Opening remarks
Ropo Sekoni, Board Chair, WSCIJ

Goodwill message
Wouter Plomp, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Nigeria

Judge's comment
Abigail Ogwezzy-Ndisika, 2023 Judges' Board Chair

Presentation of awards
Category Awards – Television, Radio, Online, Editorial Cartoon, Photo & Print
Honorary Awards – Human Rights Defender Award
& Lifetime Award for Journalistic Excellence

Appreciation
Motunrayo Alaka, Executive Director/CEO, WSCIJ

Welcome Speech

Honouring the guards of our civic space

At the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ), we believe that fostering an environment that enables citizens to participate meaningfully in the cultural, economic, political, and social life of the country is germane. The conduciveness of the civic space remains paramount and investigative reporting can midwife this.

In continuation of the WSCIJ's Civic Space Guard Project, our awardees tonight represent journalists whose works embody the principles of excellence and editorial integrity in the persistent pursuit of truth that the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting upholds. Each of the stories they told in words, pictures, voices and images and the investigations they undertook have contributed immensely to achieving our goal as guardians of truth.

As we acknowledge and honour the award recipients today, we also pay special tribute to a civic space guard par excellence – the Late Lai Oso – for how he promoted investigative reporting and the role of the media. We celebrate not just a thoroughbred scholar but also a selfless guardian of journalistic ethics and a champion of the free press in Nigeria. His work and commitment resonate with his belief that journalists must work to ensure government accountability and transparency.

As his wife – Mrs Abimbola Oso – receives this posthumous Lifetime Award for Journalistic Excellence and the Anti-Corruption/Human Rights Defender Award on behalf of his family, we ask that the Nigerian media carry on his legacy by keeping the torch of journalistic integrity burning.

While we thank the Netherlands Embassy for its support for activities under our civic space guard programme, which includes this award for the next two years, we must again reiterate that the WSCIJ will continue to throw its weight behind journalists and other actors who relentlessly stand as guardians of our civic space and enable collaborations that strengthen good governance.

Motunrayo Alaka
Executive Director/CEO, WSCIJ





Supported by
 Nigerian Journalists' Association

AWARD FINALISTS



Ayodele Adeniran



Victor Asowata



Kemi Busari



Chukwuemeka Emenike



Omolabake Fasogbon



Marcus Fatunmole



Sharon Ijasan



Beloved John



Folashade Ogunrinde



Lami Sadiq

HONORARY AWARD RECIPIENT

Posthumous Lifetime Award for Journalistic Excellence & Human Rights Defender Award



Professor Lai Oso

JUDGES



Abigail Ogwezy-Ndisika
Professor of Mass Communication



Umaru Pate
Vice Chancellor, Federal University of Kashere (FUK), Gombe State



Stella Din-Jacob
TVC Communications, Director of News



Dayo Aiyetan
Executive Director, International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR)



Stella Iyaji
Managing Editor, Daily Trust



Akintunde Akinleye
PhD Candidate, Carleton University



Mike Asukwo
Cartoonist, BusinessDay





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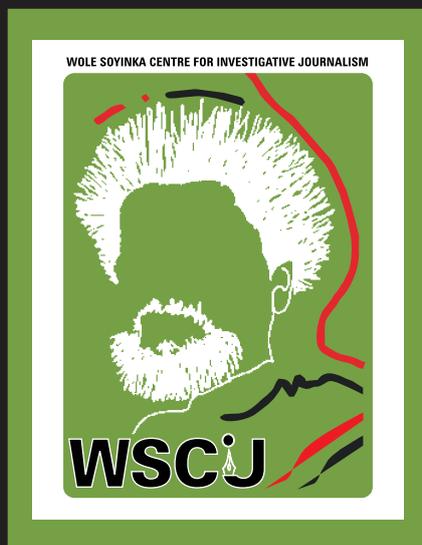
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