

From Ballots to Bullets? Democratic Disillusionment and the Micro-Foundations of Armed Mobilisation in Nigeria

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Armed mobilisation; Democratic disillusionment; Legitimacy; Nigeria; Peace and security DOI: 10.63280/jpsd.v2i1.50530	Across many electoral democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, persistent insecurity challenges the assumption that democratic governance inherently promotes peace. Nigeria exemplifies this paradox, where repeated electoral cycles coexist with escalating violence, including insurgency, banditry, and communal conflict. While existing studies emphasise structural drivers such as poverty and weak institutions, less attention has been paid to how citizens' perceptions of democratic failure shape pathways to violence. This study examines the micro-foundations of armed mobilisation by analysing how democratic disillusionment influences individual and collective engagement with non-state violence in Nigeria. It asks: (1) How do citizens interpret and respond to perceived failures of democratic governance? and (2) How do these perceptions affect their willingness to support or participate in violent alternatives? The study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data, drawing on policy reports and existing scholarly literature. Using a thematic and interpretive analytical approach, it traces the relationship between perceived democratic exclusion, declining institutional trust, and patterns of armed mobilisation. The study demonstrates that insecurity is not only a product of structural deprivation but also of legitimacy crises that reshape citizens' calculations about authority and participation. By foregrounding perception and agency, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of the democracy-security nexus. In particular, it shows that structural conditions translate into mobilisation outcomes through interpretive processes at the micro level, with democratic disillusionment functioning as a key intervening mechanism. The study contributes to scholarship on democracy and conflict by highlighting how legitimacy is constructed and contested through everyday interpretations of governance Copyright © 2026 JPSPD. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Across much of sub-Saharan Africa, the relationship between democratic governance and security remains deeply contested (Omilusi, 2024). Liberal peace scholarship has long associated democratic governance with political stability, arguing that accountable institutions, electoral competition, and citizen participation reduce the likelihood of violent conflict (Doyle, 1983; Paris, 2004). Yet persistent insecurity across several electoral democracies raises important questions about the conditions under which democracy succeeds or fails in generating peace. Nigeria presents a particularly compelling illustration of this puzzle. Despite more than two decades of uninterrupted civilian rule, the country continues to experience multiple and overlapping forms of insecurity, including insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, and recurrent communal violence across several regions (Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025).

This coexistence of democratic continuity and persistent insecurity presents an important theoretical challenge. If democratic institutions are expected to provide peaceful channels for political participation, grievance articulation, and conflict management, why do perceptions of democratic failure sometimes contribute to support for violence rather than political reform, civic activism, or political disengagement? Put differently, how do citizens move from dissatisfaction with democratic governance to engagement with, or support for, non-state violence?

Existing scholarship has offered important explanations by emphasising poverty, unemployment, exclusion, weak state capacity, and governance failures as drivers of conflict (Ibrahim, 2017). However, these explanations largely operate at structural and institutional levels and offer limited insight into the processes through which citizens interpret these conditions and translate them into political choices. Contemporary peace and conflict scholarship increasingly recognises that legitimacy, perceptions, and agency are critical for understanding patterns of mobilisation and violence (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2014). Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been devoted to the micro-level mechanisms through which perceptions of democratic failure shape pathways to armed mobilisation in Nigeria.

This study addresses this gap through the concept of democratic disillusionment, understood as the erosion of confidence in democratic institutions as credible mechanisms for representation, accountability, and political change. The central argument is not simply that democratic failures contribute to insecurity, a claim already established in the literature, but that democratic disillusionment functions as an intervening mechanism linking perceptions of democratic failure

to pathways of armed mobilisation. When democratic institutions are perceived as ineffective, exclusionary, unresponsive, citizens may reassess the legitimacy of existing institutions and become more receptive to alternative forms of authority and political engagement.

Accordingly, the study addresses two questions: (1) how do citizens interpret and respond to perceived failures of democratic governance? and (2) under what conditions do these perceptions contribute to support for or participation in non-state violence? Rather than treating violence as an automatic consequence of structural deprivation or institutional weakness, the analysis focuses on how perception, legitimacy, and agency shape pathways to political withdrawal and armed mobilisation.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on the interpretive analysis of secondary data, including policy reports, institutional publications, and existing scholarly literature. Through a thematic and interpretive approach, it examines the relationship between declining institutional trust, legitimacy re-evaluation, and pathways to armed mobilisation.

The study contributes to debates on the democracy-security nexus by demonstrating how citizens' perceptions mediate the relationship between structural conditions and violent mobilisation. By foregrounding democratic disillusionment, it offers a micro-foundational perspective that helps explain how insecurity may be reproduced within electoral democracies. The remainder of the paper proceeds with a review of the relevant literature, followed by the analytical framework and methodology. The subsequent sections present the analysis, while the final section concludes by discussing the theoretical and policy implications of the findings.

Literature Review: Democracy, Legitimacy, and Armed Mobilisation in Nigeria

Nigeria's contemporary security landscape presents a significant challenge to the assumption that democratic governance inherently produces stability. While the "liberal peace" thesis suggests that democratic consolidation reduces internal conflict through accountability and participation, empirical realities in Nigeria reveal a more complex and often contradictory relationship. Despite over two decades of electoral democracy, the country continues to experience insurgency, banditry, and communal violence. This section reviews four strands of scholarship that explain the transition from democratic participation ("ballots") to violent engagement ("bullets"), while identifying the gap this study addresses.

Democracy and Insecurity: The Limits of Electoralism

A first body of literature interrogates the failure of democratic institutions to generate peace. Gberevbie (2014) and Ndzamangwi (2022) argue that democracy without effective and functional institutions produces limited governance outcomes, often resulting in instability rather than order. Ndzamangwi's comparative analysis of countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Mali suggests that the persistence of insecurity alongside electoral processes is not unique to Nigeria, but reflects a broader regional pattern. Similarly, Moshoeshe and Dzinesa (2024) highlight a disconnect between continental democratic norms and their implementation at sub-regional levels, limiting the effectiveness of governance frameworks designed to stabilise political systems.

More critical perspectives emphasise the erosion of democratic substance beneath formal electoral processes. Pallotti (2018) links governance failures to the depoliticisation of development, arguing that the treatment of governance challenges as technical issues allows authoritarian practices to persist under democratic façades. Omilusi (2024) extends this argument by identifying patterns of democratic rollback and institutional weakening across the region. Akwei et al. (2023) further demonstrate how elections themselves can become sites of coercion, where militarisation and manipulation undermine public confidence. Abubakar (2017) adds a communicative dimension, suggesting that weak state messaging in conflict situations allows insurgent narratives to gain traction, further distancing citizens from democratic institutions. Taken together, these studies suggest that the mere presence of elections does not guarantee legitimacy or stability. Instead, where democratic processes fail to deliver credible governance, they may contribute to disillusionment rather than trust.

Structural Drivers of Violence

A second strand of literature focuses on the material conditions underpinning insecurity. Nogales and Oldiges (2023) demonstrate that multidimensional poverty—encompassing deficits in education, healthcare, and infrastructure—is strongly associated with conflict dynamics. Ujunwa et al. (2019) reinforce this position by linking armed conflict to disruptions in food systems, creating cycles in which deprivation both results from and contributes to violence.

Other scholars shift attention towards the normalisation of violence within socio-economic contexts. Onapajo and Uzodike (2017) and Ibrahim (2017) argue that economic marginalisation has transformed violence into a rational survival strategy, particularly in contexts where formal employment opportunities are limited. Similarly, Mohammed and Ibrahim (2020) and Aliyu and Chukwudi (2015) contend that persistent poverty weakens incentives for democratic participation, as citizens perceive limited returns from engagement with formal political processes.

While these perspectives provide important insights into the structural conditions that enable violence, they tend to assume a direct relationship between deprivation and mobilisation. In doing so, they often overlook the role of interpretation—how individuals understand and respond to their conditions. Not all individuals exposed to poverty or inequality engage in violence, suggesting that additional mediating factors, particularly related to perception and legitimacy, are at play.

Legitimacy, Trust, and Democratic Disillusionment

A growing body of scholarship addresses these mediating factors by focusing on political legitimacy and institutional trust. Within this study, democratic disillusionment is understood as the erosion of citizens' confidence in democratic institutions as effective mechanisms for representation, accountability, and political change. Ogundiya (2008, 2009) conceptualises legitimacy as dependent on accountability, arguing that governance systems must continuously reproduce trust through performance. When this cycle breaks, citizens withdraw their consent, resulting in a legitimacy crisis. Aliu (2019) reinforces this view by identifying corruption as a central factor undermining trust in Nigeria's democratic institutions, particularly during the Fourth Republic. Nweke and Odinigwe (2023) extend this discussion by applying Weberian theory to the Nigerian context, showing how formal legal-rational authority is frequently undermined by informal and traditional power structures. This coexistence of competing legitimacies creates uncertainty among citizens regarding the rightful source of authority. Seiyefa (2017) further suggests that elite political behaviour, characterised by a "do-or-die" approach to power, contributes to the normalisation of violence within the political system.

Recent studies deepen this analysis by examining contemporary electoral dynamics. Okoye et al. (2025) and Oyekanmi and Rosenje (2022) argue that electoral processes have increasingly failed to inspire public confidence, particularly due to perceived inefficiencies and irregularities. Abah and Nwokuwu (2015) warn that such disillusionment creates a vacuum in which non-state actors can present themselves as alternative sources of authority and protection. Collectively, this literature demonstrates that declining trust in democratic institutions is not merely an abstract concern but a critical factor shaping how citizens relate to the state. However, while it establishes the existence of democratic disillusionment, it provides limited insight into how such disillusionment translates into active support for or participation in violence.

Micro-Foundations of Armed Mobilisation

Addressing this limitation requires engagement with the micro-foundations of armed mobilisation. For this study, armed mobilisation refers to the processes through which individuals become supportive of, affiliated with, or actively involved in organised forms of political violence. Emerging research in conflict studies emphasises that participation in violence is not an automatic response to structural conditions, but rather the outcome of individual and collective

decision-making processes. Dan Suleiman (2020) and Ismail (2013) conceptualise mobilisation as a gradual and dynamic process shaped by both structural pressures and personal experiences. Their work highlights how individuals interpret their environment and evaluate available options, rather than simply reacting to objective conditions. Akpan (2015) contributes to this perspective by demonstrating how economic marginalisation can make political violence appear as a rational livelihood strategy, particularly among unemployed youth. However, this rationality is not purely economic; it is shaped by perceptions of exclusion and the perceived ineffectiveness of democratic participation.

Fasiku (2025) offers a particularly important theoretical contribution by introducing the concept of autonomy. He argues that extreme deprivation constrains meaningful political choice, reducing the perceived value of democratic participation. In such contexts, engagement in violence may be interpreted not only as survival, but as a means of reclaiming agency within an unresponsive system. Okonkwo and Akanji (2025) and Yusuf (2019) further demonstrate that individual grievances, often rooted in localised injustices, can escalate into broader patterns of insecurity when reinforced by weak institutional responses. Despite these insights, the literature on micro-level mobilisation remains insufficiently connected to debates on democratic governance. In particular, there is limited analysis of how democratic disillusionment shapes the cognitive and behavioural pathways that lead individuals towards violence.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the structural, institutional, and socio-economic drivers of insecurity in Nigeria. It demonstrates that violence is shaped by multidimensional poverty, weak institutions, governance failures, and declining legitimacy. Studies rooted in grievance-based explanations have shown how relative deprivation, exclusion, and perceived injustice generate conditions conducive to conflict, while other perspectives emphasise the strategic and material incentives that shape participation in violence. However, these approaches often focus either on the origins of grievances or on the broader conditions associated with mobilisation, providing less insight into the intervening processes through which citizens interpret democratic failure and translate such perceptions into support for or participation in violence.

This study addresses this gap by examining the micro-foundations of armed mobilisation through the lens of democratic disillusionment. Rather than treating democratic failure, legitimacy deficits, or socio-economic grievances as direct causes of violence, it focuses on how these conditions are perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by citizens. In doing so, the study conceptualises democratic disillusionment as a mediating mechanism linking perceived democratic failure to changing understandings of legitimacy, political withdrawal, and, under certain conditions, support for alternative forms of authority. The contribution of the study is therefore primarily conceptual and analytical. By linking democratic legitimacy, perception, and individual agency within a single framework, it

offers a more integrated understanding of the democracy–security nexus in contemporary Nigeria.

Analytical Framework: Democratic Disillusionment and the Micro-Foundations of Armed Mobilisation

This study adopts an analytical framework that links democratic legitimacy to individual-level decision-making in contexts of insecurity. Moving beyond structural and institutional explanations, it focuses on how citizens interpret democratic governance and how these interpretations shape their engagement with, or withdrawal from, both formal political processes and non-state forms of violence. This approach also builds upon critiques emerging from post-liberal and hybrid peace scholarship, which challenge the assumption that democratic institutions automatically generate security and emphasise the importance of everyday experiences, local legitimacy, and citizen-state relations in shaping peace outcomes (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2014). Rather than revisiting the broader debate on whether democracy produces peace, the framework focuses on the micro-level processes through which citizens experience democratic governance and translate these experiences into different forms of political action. At the centre of this framework is the concept of democratic legitimacy, understood as the belief among citizens that political institutions and processes are rightful, responsive, and worthy of compliance (Ogundiya, 2008). Drawing on Beetham (1991) and Gilley (2006), legitimacy is conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing procedural legitimacy (confidence in the fairness and credibility of democratic processes such as elections), output legitimacy (the perceived effectiveness of governance performance), and sociological legitimacy (the extent to which institutions are viewed as rightful and deserving of public compliance). Democratic institutions are more likely to command trust when these dimensions reinforce one another. Conversely, when elections are perceived as manipulated, governance as ineffective or corrupt, and state institutions as unresponsive, legitimacy progressively erodes.

This erosion produces what this study conceptualises as democratic disillusionment. Democratic disillusionment refers to the condition in which citizens no longer view formal political processes as credible mechanisms for representation or change. It is characterised by declining trust in institutions, scepticism towards electoral outcomes, and a growing sense of exclusion from decision-making processes. Importantly, disillusionment is not merely a passive attitude; it reshapes how individuals understand their relationship with the state and the options available to them (Dan Suleiman, 2020; Fasiku, 2025). The concept is analytically distinct from related ideas such as political alienation, legitimisation crisis, and anti-politics. Unlike political alienation, which broadly refers to feelings of detachment from politics, democratic disillusionment specifically concerns the erosion of confidence in democratic institutions as meaningful instruments of representation and change. Similarly, whereas Habermas' (1975) notion of legitimisation crisis primarily describes a systemic inability of political institutions to sustain public consent, democratic

disillusionment is situated at the citizen level and focuses on how individuals interpret and respond to perceived democratic failure. It therefore captures an interpretive condition through which citizens reassess the value and efficacy of democratic participation.

To capture how these perceptions translate into action, the study draws on a micro-foundational approach. This perspective emphasises that large-scale political outcomes, including conflict and insecurity, are the aggregate result of individual and collective decisions. Participation in violence is therefore not treated as an automatic response to structural conditions such as poverty or unemployment, but as a contingent outcome shaped by perception, experience, and context (Kalyvas, 2006; Yusuf, 2019). In doing so, the framework draws on interpretive and relational approaches to contentious politics, which view political action as emerging from how individuals perceive opportunities, constraints, and available repertoires of action (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Individuals are therefore not conceptualised as passive recipients of structural pressures but as active interpreters who evaluate different courses of action within constrained environments.

Individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of different forms of engagement, whether participation in elections, withdrawal from politics, or alignment with non-state actors, based on their beliefs about legitimacy and efficacy. Within this framework, democratic disillusionment functions as a mediating variable between structural conditions and behavioural outcomes. The framework also departs from relative deprivation approaches (Gurr, 1970) and greed-versus-grievance debates (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) by arguing that structural grievances and material incentives alone do not sufficiently explain mobilisation unless they are interpreted through citizens' perceptions of democratic legitimacy. While factors such as economic deprivation and institutional weakness create enabling conditions for instability, it is the perception that democratic systems have failed that alters individual calculations. When citizens perceive that the "ballot" no longer offers a viable means of influencing governance, alternative pathways, including support for or participation in violence, may become more acceptable. The framework therefore does not dispute existing grievance-based, legitimacy-deficit, or rational-choice explanations of conflict. Rather, it complements them by explaining how these broader conditions are filtered through citizen perceptions and transformed into different forms of political action. In this sense, democratic disillusionment functions as an intervening mechanism linking structural conditions to decisions made at the individual level.

The role of agency within this framework is understood as bounded rather than absolute. Citizens operating in contexts of insecurity do not exercise unrestricted choice, as their decisions are shaped by poverty, exclusion, insecurity, local power structures, and the availability of alternative authorities. Nevertheless, these constraints do not eliminate agency entirely. Rather, individuals retain the capacity to choose among a limited set of available options, including continued engagement with formal democratic institutions, political withdrawal, non-violent adaptation, or alignment with non-state actors. Consequently, support for

violence is not assumed to be inevitable; it represents one possible outcome among several competing responses to democratic disappointment.

This process also involves a shift in how authority is understood. As trust in formal institutions declines, the state's claim to legitimate authority weakens, creating space for competing actors. Non-state groups, whether insurgent movements, armed networks, or local militias, may then be perceived not only as sources of coercion, but as alternative providers of protection, justice, or opportunity. In such contexts, engagement with these actors can be interpreted as a rational response to perceived state failure, rather than as purely deviant behaviour. Accordingly, the framework conceptualises armed mobilisation as a heuristic sequence consisting of five interconnected processes: **perceived democratic failure → democratic disillusionment → withdrawal from formal politics → re-evaluation of legitimacy → engagement with alternative (including violent) actors**. This sequence is not intended as a deterministic causal chain but as an analytical tool for tracing how perceptions of democratic failure may, under certain conditions, contribute to support for or participation in non-state violence.

Importantly, this progression is neither linear nor uniform. Individuals experiencing democratic disillusionment may pursue different trajectories, including apathy, civic adaptation, non-violent forms of engagement, or violent mobilisation, depending on their socio-economic circumstances, social networks, and exposure to mobilising structures. The framework, therefore, seeks to explain not why all citizens become violent, but why some individuals become receptive to violent alternatives while others do not.

By integrating legitimacy, perception, and agency, this framework provides a more nuanced understanding of the democracy–security nexus. It shifts the focus from what democratic institutions are designed to do, to how they are experienced by citizens and how these experiences shape subsequent decisions regarding political participation and authority. The contribution of the framework is therefore primarily conceptual and analytical rather than empirical. Rather than proposing a new theory of conflict, it synthesises insights from legitimacy theory, micro-foundational approaches, and mobilisation scholarship to explain how democratic disillusionment mediates the relationship between perceived democratic failure and pathways of armed mobilisation. In doing so, it offers an analytical lens through which the persistence of insecurity in electoral democracies such as Nigeria can be more effectively understood.

Methodology Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive analysis of secondary data to examine the relationship between democratic disillusionment and armed mobilisation in Nigeria. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explore how citizens interpret democratic governance, legitimacy, and political participation, rather than to measure or establish deterministic causal relationships between variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is therefore positioned as a conceptual and interpretive inquiry that synthesises existing evidence to examine plausible pathways through which democratic disillusionment may contribute to support for or participation in non-state violence.

The exclusive use of secondary data is appropriate for three reasons. First, the study focuses on governance practices, citizen perceptions, and mobilisation processes that have already been extensively documented across scholarly, policy, and institutional sources. Second, armed mobilisation in conflict-affected settings presents significant practical and ethical challenges for primary data collection, particularly when engaging directly with vulnerable populations and communities experiencing insecurity (Wood, 2006). Third, the use of secondary data enables the integration of dispersed evidence across multiple contexts and time periods, thereby facilitating a broader interpretive understanding of the relationship between democratic legitimacy and insecurity in Nigeria.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study relies exclusively on secondary qualitative data derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, institutional publications, governance assessments, and existing empirical studies relating to democracy, legitimacy, insecurity, and armed mobilisation in Nigeria and comparable sub-Saharan African contexts.

Sources were selected purposively according to four criteria. First, sources had to demonstrate direct relevance to democratic governance, democratic legitimacy, political trust, insecurity, armed mobilisation, or conflict dynamics. Second, priority was given to studies focusing specifically on Nigeria, while relevant comparative studies from sub-Saharan Africa were included where they provided broader contextual insights. Third, only sources demonstrating scholarly credibility or institutional reliability were retained.

This purposive selection strategy was intended to ensure analytical depth while maintaining coherence between the study's objectives and the evidence synthesised. Rather than seeking exhaustive coverage of all literature relating to insecurity in Nigeria, the selection process prioritised sources capable of illuminating the relationship between democratic disillusionment and pathways to armed mobilisation.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic and interpretive analytical approach. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, relationships, and interpretive processes through which democratic failure may shape support for or participation in violence. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analytical process was conducted in three stages.

First, all documents were systematically reviewed and organised according to their substantive relevance to the study objectives. An initial deductive coding framework was developed from the core concepts underpinning the analytical framework, including democratic legitimacy, democratic disillusionment, citizen agency, and armed mobilisation.

Second, a combination of deductive and inductive coding was employed to identify recurring ideas, institutional patterns, and interpretive processes emerging across the literature. Related codes were subsequently grouped into four overarching themes: (1) perceptions of democratic failure; (2) legitimacy erosion and declining institutional trust; (3) political withdrawal and the re-evaluation of authority; and (4) pathways to armed mobilisation and support for non-state actors.

Third, these themes were interpreted relationally rather than in isolation. The analysis examined how interactions among these themes shape different responses to democratic disappointment, including disengagement, adaptation, or support for alternative forms of authority. In doing so, the study adopts an interpretive process-oriented approach that traces plausible pathways through which democratic disillusionment may contribute to different forms of political response without assuming a deterministic relationship between democratic failure and violence.

Trustworthiness and Analytical Orientation

To enhance methodological rigour, the study employed triangulation through the systematic comparison of findings, arguments, and interpretations across multiple categories of evidence, including scholarly literature, policy reports, governance assessments, and institutional publications (Denzin, 2009). This process facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, areas of convergence, and points of divergence concerning democratic legitimacy, political trust, insecurity, and mobilisation.

The study is interpretive in orientation and guided by the analytical framework developed in this paper. Rather than attempting to empirically verify individual motivations for violence, the objective is to synthesise existing evidence in order to explain how perceptions of democratic failure may shape citizens' understandings of legitimacy and influence their responses to democratic governance. Consequently, the findings should be understood as analytically transferable to similar contexts rather than statistically generalisable.

Limitations

While reliance on secondary data enables broad analytical coverage and the synthesis of dispersed evidence, it also presents methodological limitations that warrant acknowledgement (Johnston, 2014). First, reliance on secondary data introduces the possibility of confirmation bias, as interpretive analyses may inadvertently privilege evidence that aligns with the proposed analytical framework. To mitigate this risk, the study systematically compared findings across diverse categories of sources and incorporated alternative explanations of mobilisation where relevant. Second, the study examines micro-level processes using evidence that is often derived from broader institutional and macro-level analyses. Consequently, caution is required when making inferences about individual decision-making, as the study does not directly observe citizens' motivations or experiences through primary fieldwork. Despite these limitations, the use of diverse and triangulated sources provides a robust basis for advancing an integrated understanding of the micro-foundations of insecurity in contemporary Nigeria.

Discussion and Analysis

The analysis proceeds through a thematic and interpretive approach, guided by the analytical framework outlined above. Drawing on secondary data, the study identifies recurring patterns in how citizens interpret democratic governance and respond to perceived institutional failure. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between declining trust, political disengagement, and the growing appeal of non-state actors as alternative points of engagement. The discussion is structured around key themes that reflect the sequential logic of the framework, beginning with democratic disillusionment and its effects on institutional trust, followed by processes of political withdrawal and the reframing of legitimacy. It then examines the micro-foundations of armed mobilisation, before considering how individual-level dynamics aggregate into broader patterns of insecurity. This approach enables a systematic exploration of how perceptions of democratic failure translate into behavioural outcomes.

Democratic Disillusionment and Declining Trust

Democratic disillusionment in Nigeria is most visibly expressed through the steady erosion of public trust in political institutions and processes. While the formal architecture of democracy, regular elections, constitutional rule, and representative institutions, remains intact, its substantive credibility has been increasingly called into question. This disconnect between procedural continuity and perceived performance lies at the heart of declining citizen confidence in democratic governance. At the core of this disillusionment is the perception that democratic institutions have failed to deliver meaningful representation, accountability, and public goods. Elections, which should serve as the primary mechanism for citizen voice and political renewal, are frequently viewed as compromised by irregularities, elite manipulation, and weak institutional oversight (Omilusi, 2024; Yusuf, 2019). As a result, participation in electoral

processes is often accompanied not by a sense of civic efficacy, but by scepticism and resignation. The “ballot,” in this context, risks losing its symbolic and practical value as an instrument of change.

This erosion of trust is further compounded by persistent governance deficits. Widespread perceptions of corruption, selective justice, and policy failure reinforce the belief that the state operates in the interests of a narrow political elite rather than the broader citizenry. In such conditions, democratic institutions are not merely seen as ineffective but as actively exclusionary. Citizens who experience marginalisation, whether economic, political, or regional, are more likely to interpret governance failures as systemic rather than incidental, deepening their sense of disconnection from the state.

This pattern is supported by evidence from Afrobarometer surveys, which consistently indicate declining levels of trust in key democratic institutions and growing dissatisfaction with democratic performance in Nigeria (Afrobarometer, 2022; Afrobarometer, 2025). Across successive survey rounds, citizens have reported diminishing confidence in political parties, elected representatives, and state institutions responsible for delivering public services and ensuring accountability. These findings suggest that democratic disillusionment is increasingly rooted in everyday experiences of governance rather than being confined to periods of electoral contestation. The significance of these findings lies not simply in documenting dissatisfaction but in demonstrating how repeated encounters with ineffective governance gradually reshape citizens' expectations regarding the capacity of democratic institutions to respond to their needs. Importantly, declining trust does not simply produce political apathy; it reshapes how citizens interpret authority and legitimacy. As confidence in formal institutions diminishes, the moral basis upon which the state claims obedience weakens. This creates a condition in which compliance with state authority becomes increasingly contingent rather than assumed. Citizens begin to question not only the performance of democratic institutions, but their right to govern.

The insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria provides an important illustration of this dynamic. The persistence of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has exposed longstanding weaknesses in state capacity, security provision, and governance responsiveness (Thurston, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2019). Although the emergence of these groups cannot be reduced solely to democratic disillusionment, prolonged insecurity, delayed state responses, and limited protection have contributed to declining confidence in government institutions. In communities such as Gwoza, Bama, and Monguno in Borno State, prolonged state absence and insecurity created conditions under which some residents pragmatically transferred aspects of their allegiance and dependence to Boko Haram or ISWAP for protection, dispute resolution, access to livelihoods, and everyday survival (International Crisis Group, 2019). Under such conditions, citizens may become increasingly receptive to alternative sources of authority that appear more immediate, predictable, or responsive to

local needs. This does not necessarily indicate ideological support for these groups; rather, it reflects adaptive responses to perceived state failure and the urgent need to secure safety and basic social order.

A similar dynamic can be observed in parts of North-West Nigeria affected by banditry. In communities such as Batsari and Jibia in Katsina State, as well as Zurmi and Shinkafi in Zamfara State, reports have documented instances in which some residents have negotiated with or paid levies to armed groups as pragmatic survival strategies in response to persistent insecurity and inadequate state protection (International Crisis Group, 2020; SBM Intelligence, 2020). Such arrangements have often been adopted to secure temporary access to farmland, facilitate movement, or reduce the risk of attacks and kidnappings. These actions should not be interpreted as ideological endorsement of armed groups. Rather, they illustrate how declining confidence in formal institutions may alter citizens' understandings of legitimacy and acceptable forms of authority when democratic channels are perceived to be ineffective. In these contexts, engagement with non-state actors frequently reflects a survival strategy adopted in response to prolonged insecurity rather than a rejection of democratic governance per se.

The implications of this shift are significant for understanding the broader security landscape. In contexts where institutional trust is low, the threshold for disengagement from formal politics is lowered. Citizens may withdraw from electoral participation, disengage from civic processes, or seek alternative avenues for expressing grievances. While not all forms of withdrawal lead to violence, the erosion of trust creates a permissive environment in which non-state actors can gain relevance and legitimacy. Moreover, democratic disillusionment is often reinforced through lived experience rather than abstract judgement. Encounters with state institutions, whether through policing, electoral administration, or access to public services, serve as critical sites where perceptions of legitimacy are formed and reproduced (Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025; Aliu, 2019). Negative experiences accumulate over time, contributing to a broader narrative of state failure that circulates within communities and social networks. In this way, disillusionment becomes socially embedded, shaping collective attitudes as much as individual perceptions.

Importantly, democratic disillusionment should not be interpreted as the sole explanation for insecurity or mobilisation. Coercion, economic incentives, local elite manipulation, identity politics, and survival strategies also shape citizens' decisions and behavioural outcomes. However, democratic disillusionment may increase the receptiveness of individuals to these alternative pathways by weakening confidence in formal democratic channels and reducing the perceived efficacy of institutional participation. In this sense, democratic disillusionment functions as an intervening mechanism that may facilitate, rather than directly cause, support for alternative forms of authority under specific contextual conditions.

Thus, declining trust in democratic institutions represents a critical first step in the pathway from ballots to bullets. It signals not only dissatisfaction with

governance outcomes, but a deeper crisis of legitimacy that alters how citizens relate to the state. Rather than treating declining trust as a passive outcome of governance failure, this analysis suggests that it constitutes an active interpretive process through which citizens reassess the value of democratic participation and reconsider the sources of authority they regard as legitimate. By foregrounding the role of perception, this analysis highlights that the persistence of insecurity in Nigeria cannot be understood solely through structural or institutional lenses; it must also account for the ways in which democratic governance is experienced, interpreted, and ultimately judged by those it seeks to serve.

Withdrawal and the Reframing of Legitimacy

As democratic disillusionment deepens, it often translates into a calculated withdrawal from formal political processes. This withdrawal is not merely a function of apathy; rather, it reflects a conscious recalibration of how citizens evaluate the utility and credibility of institutional participation. When electoral processes are perceived as ineffective or predetermined, the ballot loses its instrumental value, making abstention a rational political response rather than a passive one. In the Nigerian context, this is reflected not only in declining voter turnout but also in reduced civic engagement and growing scepticism towards political actors, signalling a broader disengagement from formal democratic structures.

Findings from multiple rounds of Afrobarometer surveys reveal a sustained decline in public confidence in elected representatives, political parties, and state institutions, accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy in Nigeria (Afrobarometer, 2022; Afrobarometer, 2025). Although dissatisfaction does not automatically translate into political withdrawal, repeated perceptions that political participation yields few tangible outcomes may gradually reduce citizens' willingness to engage with formal democratic processes. This suggests that political disengagement often emerges as an adaptive response to perceived institutional ineffectiveness rather than as an expression of indifference towards politics itself.

More significant than withdrawal itself, however, is what it represents: a shift in how legitimacy is understood and assigned. As confidence in the state erodes, particularly in contexts where governance is perceived as distant or unresponsive, citizens begin to reassess the sources of authority that shape their political and social lives. This reassessment leads to a movement away from legal-rational institutions towards more immediate and functional forms of authority capable of addressing everyday concerns, especially in areas affected by insecurity and weak state presence (Aliu, 2019).

Importantly, this shift does not imply an outright rejection of the Nigerian state. Rather, it reflects a layered and pragmatic hybridity, in which citizens, particularly in regions such as the North-West and North-East, navigate between the symbolic authority of the state and the functional power of non-state actors

(Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025). While the state may retain formal legitimacy, its practical authority becomes increasingly contested. In such environments, compliance is no longer automatic; it is negotiated and conditional. For many in marginalised communities, engagement with local vigilante networks or even armed groups can represent a rational, if constrained, response to persistent insecurity (Dan Suleiman, 2020). This transformation also alters the normative boundaries of acceptable political behaviour. Actions that would ordinarily be considered illegitimate, such as tacit support for or collaboration with non-state armed actors, may become justifiable within contexts of perceived state failure, particularly where survival and security are immediate concerns.

This dynamic can be observed in several conflict-affected communities across northern Nigeria. In parts of Katsina and Zamfara States, residents have entered into informal arrangements with armed groups by paying levies or negotiating temporary access to farmlands and transportation routes in order to reduce exposure to attacks and kidnappings (International Crisis Group, 2020; SBM Intelligence, 2020). Similarly, in some communities affected by the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State, residents have at times relied on insurgent-controlled systems of dispute resolution, taxation, or security provision when state institutions were absent or unable to provide adequate protection (International Crisis Group, 2019). These responses are primarily survival-oriented strategies adopted in contexts where formal institutions are perceived as unable to guarantee security and everyday stability. Rather, they demonstrate how prolonged insecurity may reshape citizens' practical understandings of legitimacy and acceptable authority. Here, the distinction between legality and legitimacy becomes blurred, and the criteria for political action shift from constitutional rules to lived realities.

Crucially, these dynamics create the conditions under which non-state actors can embed themselves within local governance structures. In the North-East, insurgent groups have, at various points, combined coercion with the provision of basic order or dispute resolution, while in parts of the North-West and North-Central regions, community-based security networks perform quasi-governance roles. By providing security, dispute resolution, or economic opportunities, such actors position themselves as viable, if imperfect, alternatives to the state. Over time, this can contribute to the normalisation of parallel systems of authority, further weakening the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force.

However, this transition should not be understood as an inevitable progression from democratic disillusionment to support for violence. At the same time, citizens' decisions are often influenced by a combination of security pressures, material constraints, local power relations, identity networks, and everyday survival considerations. Individuals facing similar levels of democratic disappointment may therefore adopt different trajectories. Some may disengage from politics altogether, others may participate in non-violent community initiatives, while a smaller subset may become receptive to armed actors. Democratic disillusionment is therefore best understood as a facilitating condition that may increase openness to alternative authorities rather than a

direct or sufficient cause of mobilisation. Withdrawal from formal politics, therefore, is not an endpoint but a transitional phase in the broader reconfiguration of political authority, marking the point at which the “ballot” ceases to be seen as meaningful and opening space for alternative forms of engagement.

The interpretive contribution of this analysis lies in demonstrating how political withdrawal functions as an intermediary mechanism linking declining trust in democratic institutions to the re-evaluation of legitimacy at the citizen level. Rather than assuming that structural grievances automatically produce mobilisation, the analysis shows how these grievances are filtered through everyday experiences of governance and translated into different behavioural responses. In this sense, the reframing of legitimacy serves as a critical bridge between democratic disillusionment and the emergence of non-state violence, setting the stage for the micro-level decisions that underpin armed mobilisation.

Micro-Foundations of Armed Mobilisation

Building on the erosion of trust and the reframing of legitimacy, the transition from political disengagement to active or passive support for violence can be understood through a micro-foundational lens. This perspective shifts attention from structural conditions and institutional failures to the level of individual and collective decision-making, examining how citizens interpret their circumstances and act upon them. In the Nigerian context, this is evident in how individuals in conflict-affected regions navigate choices between participation in formal politics, disengagement, or alignment with armed groups operating within their communities. Rather than assuming that structural deprivation automatically produces violence, the micro-foundational perspective emphasises an interpretive sequence through which perceived democratic failure may reshape political behaviour: declining political efficacy may encourage disengagement from formal institutions, increase openness to alternative sources of authority, and, under specific conditions, contribute to support for or participation in armed mobilisation.

At this level, participation in armed mobilisation is not treated as an automatic or inevitable outcome of poverty, marginalisation, or weak governance. Rather, it is understood as a contingent process shaped by perception, experience, and rational calculation (Ismail, 2013). Individuals weigh the perceived costs and benefits of different forms of engagement, including continued participation in formal politics, withdrawal, or alignment with non-state actors. At this level, participation in armed mobilisation is not treated as an automatic or inevitable outcome of poverty, marginalisation, or weak governance. Rather, it is understood as a contingent process shaped by how individuals assess available opportunities, risks, and constraints within their immediate environments (Ismail, 2013). Citizens evaluate whether continued engagement with formal democratic institutions can realistically improve their circumstances or whether alternative actors offer more immediate solutions to pressing security and

livelihood challenges. The significance of this perspective lies in shifting attention from the existence of grievances themselves to the decisions individuals make in response to them. Under conditions where institutional responses are perceived as ineffective, some individuals may become more receptive to alternative forms of authority that appear capable of addressing immediate needs, while others may continue to rely on formal institutions or adopt non-violent coping strategies.

A key factor in this process is the role of perceived efficacy. When citizens believe that their participation in formal political processes cannot produce meaningful change, the incentive to engage within those structures diminishes (Ibrahim, 2017). Conversely, non-state actors may present themselves as more responsive or capable of addressing immediate grievances. This is reflected in contexts where communities rely on armed groups or local militias for dispute resolution or security in the absence of consistent state protection. In such settings, support for or participation in these groups can be interpreted as a rational adaptation to a constrained set of options. This dynamic is particularly evident among economically and politically marginalised populations, especially among youth in regions affected by chronic unemployment and insecurity (Akpan, 2015; Nogales & Oldiges, 2023). Engagement in activities such as banditry in the North-West, insurgency in the North-East, or participation in political violence during electoral cycles may serve multiple functions simultaneously: a means of economic sustenance, a form of social belonging, and a channel for expressing grievances.

However, exposure to democratic disillusionment does not produce uniform behavioural outcomes. Individuals experiencing similar levels of political disappointment may pursue different trajectories depending on their social environments, livelihood opportunities, and access to alternative forms of support. For example, some citizens may respond through civic disengagement or adaptation, while others may become more receptive to violent alternatives. These variations suggest that mobilisation is mediated by factors such as social networks, local leadership, community cohesion, and the availability of legitimate coping mechanisms. Consequently, pathways to mobilisation should be understood as contingent rather than predetermined, with behavioural outcomes varying according to individuals' social environments, available opportunities, and exposure to mobilising structures.

The decision to participate is therefore embedded within a broader socio-economic and political context, but it is ultimately enacted at the level of individual agency. Importantly, the pathway to armed mobilisation is rarely linear or uniform. Individuals may move through different stages, ranging from grievance and disillusionment to passive support and active participation, depending on their circumstances and exposure to mobilising structures. In Nigeria, social networks, local leaders, and community dynamics, such as kinship ties, peer influence, and local patronage systems, play a critical role in mediating these transitions, shaping both the availability of opportunities for mobilisation and the narratives that justify them.

The concept of autonomy is also instructive in understanding this process. In contexts where citizens feel systematically excluded from meaningful political participation, engagement in non-state violence may be framed as a way of reclaiming agency. The “bullet,” in this sense, is not only an instrument of coercion but also a perceived tool for asserting influence in a system that otherwise renders individuals powerless. While such actions may undermine broader societal stability, they can appear rational and even necessary from the perspective of those involved. Support for or participation in armed mobilisation is also shaped by multiple interacting factors beyond citizens' evaluations of democratic governance. Coercion, economic incentives, elite manipulation, identity-based affiliations, and immediate survival considerations frequently influence decision-making processes. The value of a micro-foundational perspective, however, lies in demonstrating how individuals navigate these competing pressures and make choices within constrained environments. Rather than treating mobilisation as a direct consequence of structural conditions, this approach emphasises that citizens actively interpret their circumstances and select among a range of available responses, some of which may involve alignment with violent actors.

Consequently, these dynamics underscore that armed mobilisation is not simply the product of structural deprivation or institutional weakness, but of how these conditions are interpreted and acted upon. The analytical significance of this argument lies not in demonstrating that democratic disillusionment directly causes violence, but in showing how it reshapes the decision-making environment within which individuals evaluate available political options. By foregrounding perception and agency, the micro-foundational approach reveals the mechanisms through which democratic disillusionment is translated into concrete forms of political behaviour. It therefore helps explain why individuals exposed to similar structural conditions may pursue different trajectories, ranging from continued engagement with formal institutions and non-violent adaptation to passive support for or participation in armed mobilisation.

It highlights that the persistence of insecurity in Nigeria is rooted not only in what the state fails to provide, but in how citizens respond to these failures in ways that reshape the landscape of authority and violence.

From Individual Choices to Systemic Insecurity

The cumulative effect of individual-level decisions described in the preceding sections is the gradual production of systemic insecurity. Rather than emerging solely from top-down institutional failure, insecurity in Nigeria is increasingly shaped through the aggregation of dispersed behavioural choices made by citizens navigating disillusionment, exclusion, and constrained governance environments (Mohammed & Ibrahim, 2020; Seiyefa, 2017). These micro-level adaptations, when repeated across different local contexts, generate broader patterns that extend beyond individual intentions and begin to structure the national security environment.

As individuals disengage from formal political processes or accommodate alternative forms of authority, these responses accumulate across communities and regions. Over time, this contributes to a reconfiguration of authority, particularly in parts of the North-East, North-West, and Middle Belt, where state presence is uneven and multiple armed actors operate alongside, and sometimes in place of, formal institutions. The outcome is not simply the proliferation of non-state groups, but the emergence of a fragmented security order in which authority is dispersed, contested, and unevenly exercised across territory and populations.

A central mechanism driving this transformation is the recursive relationship between violence and social response. Armed groups do not only exploit existing grievances; they also generate new ones through practices such as extortion, abduction, forced taxation, and territorial control. These practices provoke further cycles of adaptation, retaliation, avoidance, or accommodation among affected populations. In this way, insecurity becomes self-reinforcing, as each round of interaction between armed actors and civilians reshapes the conditions for the next. Over time, this dynamic gradually detaches contemporary violence from its initial triggering conditions and embeds it within everyday governance and survival strategies.

Within this context, citizens often adopt pragmatic approaches to survival, engaging with whichever actor—state or non-state—is perceived as most capable of delivering immediate protection, mobility, or economic access. While such engagements are typically instrumental rather than ideological, their cumulative effect is significant. As these interactions become routinised, they contribute to the gradual normalisation of non-state authority and weaken expectations that the state is the primary guarantor of security and justice. The boundary between formal and informal governance becomes increasingly blurred, particularly in peripheral and conflict-affected areas.

The systemic implication of these dynamics is the consolidation of insecurity as a self-sustaining condition. What begins as dispersed individual responses to perceived institutional failure aggregates into a broader structural pattern characterised by fragmented authority, overlapping governance systems, and persistent violence. This does not imply that individual decisions alone explain insecurity, but rather that micro-level adaptations interact with institutional weaknesses to produce emergent system-level outcomes that cannot be reduced to any single causal factor.

Accordingly, security responses that focus exclusively on coercive containment risk addressing only the visible manifestations of a deeper process. Without parallel efforts to restore institutional legitimacy and rebuild citizen confidence in democratic governance, insecurity is likely to persist even in the presence of intensified security interventions.

Rethinking the Democracy-Security Nexus

The analysis presented in this study calls for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between democracy and security. Conventional assumptions within the liberal peace framework posit that the establishment of democratic institutions, particularly competitive elections, naturally contributes to stability (Doyle, 1983; Paris, 2004). However, the Nigerian case demonstrates that the presence of democratic forms does not guarantee peaceful outcomes. Instead, the effectiveness of democracy in promoting security depends critically on how it is experienced and perceived by citizens. Building on this, the study argues that existing liberal peace explanations insufficiently account for the micro-level mechanisms through which democratic institutions translate into security outcomes, particularly in contexts marked by weak legitimacy and uneven governance performance. This study advances the argument that legitimacy, rather than institutional form alone, is the key variable linking democracy to security. Where democratic systems are perceived as inclusive, accountable, and responsive, they can foster trust and reduce incentives for violence. Conversely, when they are experienced as exclusionary or ineffective, they may generate disillusionment and contribute to instability. The democracy-security nexus must therefore be understood not as a direct or automatic relationship, but as one mediated by citizen perceptions and behavioural responses.

In practical terms, this implies that efforts to enhance security must go beyond strengthening formal institutions or increasing electoral frequency. While these measures remain important, they are insufficient in the absence of broader efforts to rebuild legitimacy. This includes improving governance outcomes, addressing corruption, ensuring the credibility of electoral processes, and creating meaningful channels for citizen participation. Without such reforms, democratic systems risk becoming hollow structures that fail to command public confidence. More importantly, this study contributes to ongoing debates in conflict and governance scholarship by shifting attention from institutional design to interpretive processes, showing how citizens actively evaluate, reinterpret, and respond to democratic performance in ways that shape security outcomes. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need to integrate micro-level perspectives into policy and scholarly debates on security. Understanding why individuals choose to disengage from formal politics or align with non-state actors provides critical insights into the persistence of violence. Policies that fail to account for these decision-making processes may address symptoms rather than causes, limiting their effectiveness. Ultimately, rethinking the democracy-security nexus requires a shift from viewing democracy as an end in itself to understanding it as a lived experience that must be continually reinforced through practice and performance. In this sense, the study employs “democratic disillusionment” as an intervening analytical concept that helps explain how perceived democratic failure is translated into differentiated political responses, including withdrawal, adaptation, and in some cases, support for non-state violence. Only by addressing the legitimacy crisis at the heart of democratic

governance can the conditions that drive armed mobilisation be meaningfully transformed.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the relationship between democratic disillusionment and armed mobilisation in Nigeria, arguing that the persistence of insecurity cannot be fully understood through structural or institutional explanations alone. While factors such as poverty, weak institutions, and governance deficits remain important, they do not sufficiently explain why individuals and groups disengage from formal political processes and, in some cases, become receptive to violent alternatives. By adopting a micro-foundational approach, the analysis has highlighted the role of perception, legitimacy, and agency in shaping political behaviour. Democratic disillusionment, rooted in declining trust, perceived exclusion, and ineffective governance, functions as an intermediary between structural conditions and behavioural outcomes. As citizens lose confidence in democratic institutions, they begin to withdraw from formal politics, reassess legitimate sources of authority, and, under certain conditions, become more receptive to non-state actors. When aggregated across individuals and communities, these responses contribute to broader patterns of fragmented authority and persistent insecurity.

The findings contribute to debates on the democracy–security nexus by demonstrating that the relationship between democratic governance and peace is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Rather, it is mediated by how democracy is experienced and interpreted by citizens. This underscores the importance of legitimacy as a foundational element of both democratic stability and security. In theoretical terms, the study contributes to liberal peace and grievance-based explanations by highlighting that structural conditions are mediated by interpretive processes at the micro level, particularly through democratic disillusionment.

From a policy perspective, addressing insecurity in Nigeria requires more than coercive or technical interventions. Efforts to rebuild legitimacy must be translated into context-specific reforms. This includes strengthening the independence and credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) through more transparent result transmission systems and reduced opportunities for electoral manipulation; improving judicial responsiveness by reducing delays in electoral dispute resolution and strengthening enforcement of electoral offences; and reforming community-level security governance by incorporating local accountability mechanisms into policing strategies, particularly in conflict-affected states such as Borno, Katsina, and Zamfara.

Without such measures, the gap between democratic form and democratic substance is likely to persist.

The study is not without limitations. Its reliance on secondary and interpretive data means that it cannot directly observe individual motivations for mobilisation, and its findings should therefore be understood as analytical rather than deterministic. Future research should build on this framework through micro-level fieldwork, including interviews and survey-based studies, to examine how democratic disillusionment operates across different Nigerian contexts. Ultimately, moving from ballots to bullets is not an inevitable trajectory but one shaped by contingent choices grounded in citizens' experiences of governance. Reversing this trajectory requires restoring the credibility of democratic institutions and reinforcing the everyday legitimacy upon which sustainable peace and security ultimately depend.

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