

The Politicization of Intelligence in Nigeria: Implications for National Security¹

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Abstract:

Intelligence is one of the foundations of national security. It provides decision-makers with the ability to anticipate threats, identify targets, and allocate resources effectively to address such threats. However, intelligence in contemporary Nigeria has been politicized by the ruling, undermining professional efficacy of key intelligence agencies, including the Department of State Services (DSS), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and other intelligence establishments under the Nigerian Police Force and resulting in the securitization of political oppositions, dissent opinions, and social protests as existential threats to justify heavy-handed responses and arbitrary surveillance. Drawing on qualitative method of data collection and analysis, the study examines the pervasive phenomenon of intelligence politicization and its impact on Nigeria's national security architecture. The study argues that political interference on the operations of intelligence agencies in Nigeria has significantly altered the professionalism of the Nigerian intelligence community, converting them as "attack-dogs" of the ruling elites for regime protection. It further argues that the continuous focus on regime protection with little attention on national security has led to chronic intelligence failures with severe implications on the country's national security. Ultimately, the study argues that depoliticizing intelligence is a critical prerequisite for building a resilient national security strategy capable of addressing Nigeria's complex and evolving security landscape. The study recommends a radical restructuring of the intelligence framework, merit-based recruitment, robust legislative oversight, among others to ensure institutional autonomy and strengthen the intelligence community for enhance national security.

Keywords:

Intelligence;
Politicization; National
Security; Democratic
Governance; Legislative
Oversight; Nigeria.

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jceeas.2026.6.2.489

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Introduction

Globally, the conduct of intelligence is recognised as a paramount national security priority, undertaken clandestinely and with strict professional discipline, insulated from politicking and partisan interests because of its critical role in national survival and long-term sustainability. It involves the collection, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence to protect a state, organizations, or individuals from threats, including the use of advanced methodologies and software tools for risk management and threat prevention (Ransom & Pringle, 2025). Intelligence requires skilled analysis, effective agency coordination, and clear directives to ensure timely and accurate responses to threats, usually handled by professionals deployed in various sectors, such as government, military, law enforcement, and private national security firms, whose mandate is to analyse and respond accurately and timely to multifaceted threats in both physical and cyber environments, such as terrorism, insurrections, espionage, and cyberattacks (Wahab, 2024). Second primary role of intelligence is to discover opportunity that will either result in national strategic advantage or maintain such advantage (Putter, 2026). When intelligence as an organization and/or a process are interfered with by politics and partisanship, its objectivity is destroyed, its effectiveness undermined, and the integrity of the national security system is eroded and fundamentally compromised.

The politicization of intelligence refers to the manipulation of intelligence analysis to fit prevailing political agendas, support specific policy preferences, or please political decision-makers. It involves a shift away from the core intelligence mission of objective analysis and truth-telling towards advocacy or “salesmanship” of a desired outcome (Treverton, 2008: 53). Politicizing the state intelligence function have become a common phenomenon in Africa, where ruling regimes use state security services, surveillance, and information control to target political opponents, suppress civic dissent, and protect partisan interests rather than national security. Recent studies published by Democracy In Africa (DIA) published in February 2026 revealed that intelligence has been personalized and politicized by ruling regimes in Africa’s longest-standing democracy countries like Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, and Algeria, noting that the structural pathologies in these countries have render State security services instruments of elite power rather than national security (DIA, 2026). This does not mean that such dangerous phenomenon is limited to these countries alone, it has been observed in several young democracies and authoritarian regimes, but more entrenched in those aforementioned countries and carried out so much impunity without consideration to the damages on national security.

Nigeria is not left behind in this dangerous phenomenon of intelligence politicization. It has emerged as a critical national concern, threatening the country’s national security and stability. The various strata of security governance have been pervaded, from the institutions of governance to the intelligence managers down to the civil populace. Intelligence agencies established to provide objective and timely intelligence for decision-making have increasingly become susceptible to political manipulation,

undermining the integrity of intelligence, compromising the effectiveness of security operations, and eroding public trust in institutions. Sadly, the consequences are obvious due to the complex security landscape where threats such as Boko Haram terrorism, armed banditry and kidnapping for ransom, militancy and oil theft, and separatist movements have continued unabated for more than two decades (Irregular Warfare Centre-IWC, 2025).

This paper explores the dynamics of intelligence politicisation in Nigeria, its implications for national security, and potential pathways for reform. It adopts a qualitative and non-empirical approach rooted in interpretive analysis. Data sources include scholarly publications on intelligence management in Nigeria and reports stemming from media coverage. Primary data sources include policy documents on Nigerian intelligence and national security to identify patterns and trends in intelligence politicization from 2015 to 2026. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse key themes, such as manipulation of intelligence for political gain, impact on security operations, and institutional responses. This approach provided a nuanced insight into complex political and security dynamics in Nigeria.

Exploring the Concepts of Intelligence, Politicization of Intelligence, and National Security

Politicization of intelligence cannot be sufficiently explained without first and foremost understanding what intelligence constitute. Intelligence, in this context is security intelligence, which is a life cycle of collecting and analysing information to support national security, including counterintelligence activities (Lowenthal, 2002). The United States Joint Publication 2-01 (2004:2) defines intelligence as the product resulting from the collection, processing, integration, evaluation, analysis, and interpretation of available information concerning foreign nations, hostile or potentially hostile forces, or areas of actual or potential operations. The whole essence of the process is to change raw data into actionable intelligence for the purpose of maintaining national security. This understanding of intelligence by the United States Joint Publication aligns with the definition enshrined in Nigeria's National Security Act (NSA Cap 278, 1993), which states that intelligence is evaluated information relevant to a government's formulation and implementation of policy to further its national security and to deal with threats from actual and potential adversaries.

The Objective of intelligence as provided by these two definitions aligns with Lowenthal (2022) position, which is to enable governments to identify threats, anticipate terrorist activities, and support evidence-based operational decisions, policies, plans and decisions. By this understanding, intelligence plays key roles in counterintelligence and counterterrorism operations, including understanding the threat, giving warning of adversary's intentions and capabilities, and finding and disrupting the adversary. It also provides counterterrorism forces with targets and opportunities to attack terrorist capabilities and processes, thereby achieving strategic objectives (Pollard, 2009). Emphatically, Ratcliff (2016) insists that integrating

intelligence into strategic and operational planning enhances the prevention and disruption of terrorist activities. This view is upheld by Gill and Phythian (2021), who posit that intelligence-led operation improves proactive decision-making, noting that without credible and reliable intelligence security operations can hardly be successful. This means that intelligence is about the ways and means adopted to protect the vital secrets of the state and how such intelligence is protected from falling into the wrong hands therefore it should be objectively handled.

Betts (2003) argues that the sacred norm of objectivity is broken when political interests determine intelligence assessments, warning that high polarization and duelling charges of politicization destroy trust and undermine national security efforts. However, scholars such as Robert Jervis (2006); Joshua Rovner (2011); and Glen Hastedt (2014) argue that intelligence is created to inform policy therefore the line between providing relevant information and influencing policy is often blurred. Although this may sound fair so as not to blame the political elites for manipulating intelligence for political gains, it is also important to note that the elites influence the choices about what data to collect, how to frame results, and which problem matters most. These choices quietly push specific political goals and values as national security goals to suppress standard and objective analysis (Gentry, 2024).

The manipulation of analysis to fit prevailing policy or politics according to Hyden (2020) strikes beyond competence to the fundamental ethics of the intelligence enterprise, which is determining the facts. This has been the bane of intelligence management in Africa where ruling elites influence intelligence experts to manipulate intelligence outcomes for their own political and personal interests at the detriment of the country's national security. Gwatiwa (2026) identifies four major variables under which intelligence personalization and politicization primarily rest in Africa, which includes historical legacies, regime type, intelligence governance styles, and the nature of state institutions charged with accountability. Using four cases studies of two democracies (South Africa & Botswana) and two authoritarians (Uganda & Algeria), the researcher concludes that liberation of postcolonial politics in the intelligence architecture, function, and governance across the regime types played a major role in the politicization and personalization of intelligence in African countries. He further notes that it is worst in countries where the heads of state have actual or intelligence-adjacent backgrounds.

Drawing from the holistic appreciation of the understanding of intelligence and intelligence politicisation Nte and Eyororokumoh (2025) assert that the politicization of intelligence in Nigeria occurs when intelligence findings are altered or hidden to serve political interests, compromising national security by leading to incorrect threat assessments and misallocated resources. This has been the bane of Nigeria's national security challenges, and the resultant effects are the rising security challenges across the country's six geopolitical zones with threatening lethality and fatalities that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of persons and displacement of millions of persons. These challenges include terrorism/insurgency in the northeast, herders/farmers conflict, inter-

ethnic conflicts, and armed banditry in the northcentral, armed banditry and kidnapping for ransom in the northwest, separatist movement in the southeast, militancy and oil theft in the south-south, and oil bunkering and kidnapping for ransom in the southwest.

Reflecting on the concept of national security, Lippman (1943) insists that a nation is secure to the extent that it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values if it wishes to avoid war and can, if challenged to, maintain them by victory in such a war. This view is echoed by Wolfers (1952), who asserts that national security is the absence of threats to acquired values and subjectively as the absence of fear that those values will be attacked. He, however, argues that national security is an ambiguous symbol that can be used by politicians to justify varied policies. It is in this light that Trager and Kronenberg (1973) describe it as that part of government policy with its objectives centred on the creation of relevant national and international political conditions favourable to the protection or extension of vital national values against existing and potential adversaries. These interpretations of national security focus on the protection of values with little or no consideration for human security.

However, new considerations of national security have emerged from the human security perspective that broadened and deepened the concept by including human well-being, economic stability, and environmental health led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In its landmark Human Development Report in 1994, the UNDP defined national security fundamentally as safety from chronic threats like hunger, disease, and repression, and protection from sudden, harmful disruptions in daily life (UNDP, 1994). Its objective as captured by Alkire (2002) centres on safeguarding the vital core of all human lives from critical, pervasive threats in such a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment. However, when the safeguarding of the vital core of all human lives is compromised for political interests, national security is undermined. It is in this light that Nigeria's former Minister of Defence, Lieutenant General Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma (rtd) warns against the politicisation of intelligence in Nigeria and calls for transparency and accountability in security management to build public trust and enhance intelligence management in Nigeria (Punch, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on three theories which include Principal-Agent Theory, Elite Theory and Structural Functionalism Theory to enable us explain how politicization happens (Principal-Agent Theory), why politicisation happens (Elite Theory), and the impact of politicisation on national security (Structural Functionalism). The principal-agent theory developed by scholars of the new institutional economic and rational choice theory such as Michael C Jensen and William Meckling (1976), Stephen Ross (1973), John Huber and Charles Shipan (2000) tries explain the relationship between the political leaders (principal) and the intelligence community (agent) such as the DSS, NIA, DIA, and other security agencies like the Nigerian Police. Its primary logic lies in the contractual and information tension between the two parties. While the principal

delegates authority which may be in conflict with national security interest, the agent prioritizes such authority over objective national interest to please the principal, which might lead to abuse of intelligence and professionalism (Nte, 2011). This is common in Nigeria where appointments of the leadership of security institutions such as the DSS, NIA and Police are exclusively rest with the President, by implication the president influences the objectivity of intelligence they produce. In most cases, the president might not even say a word, but they follow his body language to align their findings with the political objectives of the president, which may include the targeting of opponents or covering up administration failures. This is the reason why in Nigeria, after an administration ended, most principal officers of that administration including heads of security and intelligence agencies are usually arrested and detained on cases of corruption and security/intelligence related crimes. Some of such cases are in the arrest and incarceration of former NSA (Colonel Dasuki rtd.) after the administration of President Jonathan in 2015 (Onuah, 2015); the arrest and detention of the Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Attorney General and Minister of Justice under President Buhari recently under current administration (Akinkuotu, 2023; Igbintade, 2025).

The elite theory on its own explains how a small, cohesive group holds the majority of political power and acts in its own self-interest rather than the state interest. Its proponents include Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Gaetano Mosca (1939), Robert Michaels (1965), and C. Wright Mills (1956) of the modern elite theory. They argue that society is always divided into a powerful few or a ruling minority (elites) and an unorganized and powerless majority (masses) (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939). The Elites includes the political, economic and military elites describe as the “triad of power” dominate national decision-making by taking full control of the machinery of government, while the unorganized and confused masses remain under their control (Mills, 1956:269). They are present in all societies; even democratic ones have eventually fallen into the rule by a few influential elites as evident in Nigeria where security/intelligence agencies are manipulated to handle crises in a way that favours the ruling political party, especially during elections. Evidence has shown that security and intelligence agencies are involved in election malpractices and election violence to favour their masters in the ruling political party in Nigeria (CLEEN Foundation, 2011; Adebayo, 2020; Obani et al., 2025). This aligns with Mosca (1939) contention of the ruling class using its political influence as a moral and legal justification for its power to manipulate security agencies for their political interests.

In attempting to analyse the impact of politicization of intelligence on national security, the study adopts the structural functionalism theory as developed by Emile Durkheim (1893), Talcott Parsons (1951), and Robert Merton (1968). According to the structural functionalists, politicization of intelligence is a dysfunction of the intelligence organ because it promotes political and personal interest over and above national interest, which often leads to systemic instability (Merton, 1968). The theory further argues that society is like a biological organism where every institution (family,

government, intelligence) is an “organ” that must function correctly for the “body” to survive, emphasizing stability as the ultimate goal (Parsons, 1951:196). This aligns with Durkheim's (1893) description of society as a complex system of interdependent parts, of which any dysfunction (which describes politicization) of any part (including intelligence) affects the entire body. For instance, if the intelligence services stop providing fact and start serving political interests, the social equilibrium breaks, leading to systemic insecurity such as armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, insurgency, and separatist movement being witnessed in Nigeria. This implies that the systemic instability facing Nigeria since the return to democracy over the past two decades could be attributed to dysfunction in the dispensation of national security, due to the manipulation of intelligence.

Drawing on the holistic appreciation of the logics of the principal-agent theory, elite theory, and structural functionalist theory to explain the politicisation of intelligence in Nigeria and its national security implications, it becomes clear that to capture the full spectrum of the problem, a theoretical triangulation (mixing theories) is necessary. No single theory can account for the institutional mechanics, the power dynamics, and the resulting systemic failures simultaneously. While the elite theory explains the sociological driver behind the politicisation of intelligence in Nigeria by the powerful ruling or elite class for their own personal interest against national security interest, the principal-agent theory explains the operational process underlying the contractual relationship between the President (principal) and the Intelligence Chiefs (agents). Structural functionalism, on the other hand, provides the framework to analyse the impact on national security, underscoring the intelligence community as a vital organ within the Nigerian state, which, when politicised, the entire social system loses its equilibrium and collapses into instability. This explains why Nigeria continues to face insecurity despite high security spending: the function of intelligence has been diverted from national protection to political regime protection, leading to systemic failure.

Overview of Nigeria's Intelligence Landscape

Nigeria's intelligence landscape is a multi-layered framework governed primarily by the National Security Agencies Act of 1986. It transitioned from a colonial-era police surveillance model to a specialized triple-agency system designed to address modern internal, foreign, and military threats. The core of the landscape consists of three specialized services that replaced the centralized National Security Organization (NSO) established by Decree 27 of 1976. It is important to note that the establishment of the NSO was to overhaul and unify the country's fragmented security architecture following the assassination of Head of State General Murtala Mohammed during the abortive 1976 coup led by Lieutenant Colonel B.S. Dimka on 13 February 1976 (Teniola, 2020). Decree 27 of 1976 created the Office of the Director General of NSO, with clearly defined objectives which include prevention and detection of any crime against the security of Nigeria, protection and preservation of all classified matter concerning or relating to the security of Nigeria, and such other purposes, whether within or outside



Nigeria as the Head of the Federal Military Government may deem necessary, with a view to securing the maintenance of the security of Nigeria (NSO Decree, 1976). However, the period witnessed two successful coup d'états (the overthrow of Alhaji Shehu Shagari in 1979 and General Muhammadu Buhari in 1985) (Siollun, 2023; Omoigui, 2015)

Shortly after the second coup that ousted General Buhari which culminated in the emergence of General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985. On June 5 1986, General Babangida enacted the National Security Agency (NSA) Decree. The NSA Decree abolished the NSO, creating three new agencies: State Security Service (SSS) (also known presently as the Department of State Service - DSS), National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), which comprises the three specialised services established to replace the centralised NSO. It also created the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) to serve as the primary coordinating body for all intelligence (NSA, 1986). As part of the reform, the staff of the NSO were absorbed into these new agencies, while the personnel of the internal security directorate were inherited by the SSS, the personnel of the external intelligence directorate were absorbed by the NIA.

It is remarkable to note that 40 years after the 1986 reform of the intelligence landscape that resulted in the emergence of the SSS, NIA, DIA, and the NSA, it remains the only comprehensive reform ever conducted by any government in terms of national security and intelligence. In 2004, the NSA Decree was formally codified into the Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, Cap 74, transforming it into an Act and becoming a significant factor for the government to streamline intelligence operations in the country. The agencies were assigned different but complementary roles in the overall intelligence inputs toward enhancing national security.

The Agencies and their Specialized Services

The State Security Service/Department of State Service (SSS/DSS) by the NSA Act Cap 74 of 1986/2004 focuses on domestic intelligence. Its mandate includes preventing and detection within Nigeria of any crime against the internal security of Nigeria, protecting and preserving non-military classified matters concerning internal security of Nigeria, and such other responsibilities affecting internal security (such as counterterrorism) within Nigeria as the Assembly or the President, Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces may deem necessary. The Agency is further empowered with additional responsibilities under the Legal Instrument No SSS 1 of 1999, which states that without prejudice to the generality of the provision relating to the general duties of the DSS set out in Section 2-3 of the Act, and to ensure the protection of the State and its officials, citizens, critical resources and infrastructure from domestic threats (DSS, 2021).

The National Intelligence Agency (NIA), by the NSA Act of 2004, as amended, is responsible for foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence operations outside Nigeria that are not related to military issues. It monitors external threats and handles diplomatic security missions, and its mission is to ensure the principal objective of protection, promotion and enhancement of Nigeria's policy objectives outside Nigeria. Its functions as stipulated in the NSA Act 2004 include: obtaining by covert sources or other means,

external intelligence on the activities of Nigerians or any person, organization or country outside Nigeria whose conduct (or activities) is aimed at bringing disrespect to Nigeria and her leaders or undermining the security of Nigeria; obtaining by covert sources or other means, external intelligence that is capable of advancing Nigeria's vital interest; identifying and assisting in the apprehension of persons outside Nigeria believed to have committed any crime against the security of Nigeria; monitoring the intentions, activities and policies of foreign countries/governments towards Nigeria and Nigerians; monitoring any external plans or acts of subversion, sabotage or terrorism against Nigeria, its economy or its people; conducting espionage, covert operations and counterintelligence activities outside Nigeria; collection, collation, analysis, projections/estimations and research on external intelligence in relation to political, socio-economic, technological and security matters; provision of protection in liaison with host security services for the President and other VIPs in the Nigerian government who are on visit overseas; and performing such other functions as may be given by the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

The Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), by the NSA Act is charged with military intelligence. It handles the prevention of military-natured crimes, protection of military classified matters, and provides tactical intelligence for the Armed Forces of Nigeria (NSA Act, 2004, as amended). The establishing Authority further assigned the following roles to the Defence Intelligence Agency: Detection and prevention of crimes of a military nature against the security of Nigeria; protection and preservation of all military classified matters concerning the security of Nigeria, both within and outside Nigeria such other responsibilities as may be assigned by the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces or the Chief of the Defence Staff as may deem necessary. It is important to note that this third responsibility is omnibus in nature (NSA Act, 2004).

The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), on the other hand, serves as the primary coordinating body for all intelligence. It also derives its powers from the NSA Act and its responsibilities as spelt out in the Act includes: To determine national intelligence priorities and direct the appropriate agencies for the collection and collation of national intelligence priorities; to collate and control the national intelligence budget as well as the supervision of its implementation by agencies through fiscal and other measures; to direct the production of intelligence reports on any subject of interest, produce intelligence reports on issues of national concern and disseminate the reports to appropriate government agencies and functionaries; protection of national intelligence estimates from submissions of the intelligence agencies; maintaining data on equipment, persons or groups of persons who are of interest to Nigeria; and arranging intelligence sharing and cooperation with other government and foreign intelligence agencies (NSA Act, 2004).

All the agencies (SSS/DSS, NIA, DIA, and ONSA) comprise Nigeria's intelligence landscape, and their main purpose is to provide intelligence to policymakers that may help inform their national security decision options. The DSS and NIA report directly to the President, while the DIA reports to the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The framework

that guides the operations of these intelligence agencies is the National Security Strategy, developed by the ONSA, which was first published in 2014 and reviewed in 2019 to address emerging threats like banditry and kidnapping.

Nigeria's Intelligence Cycle Model

The intelligence cycle is a universal process amongst intelligence community. It is a planned methodological and logical process geared towards performing four primary tasks for the government, which include avoiding strategic surprise; supporting government long-term planning, and ensuring that government information, methods and processes are kept secret (Lowenthal, 2020). Performing these tasks requires a rigorous understanding and assessment of an adversary's capabilities, intentions, and possible reactions. In Nigeria, the intelligence cycle has four steps: planning & direction, collection, processing, and dissemination & use. This general framework is captured in the National Security Framework (2004) as follows:

Planning and Direction

Policymakers and commanders define their information needs and priorities. This is the management phase where critical intelligence gaps are identified, and priority intelligence requirements (PIRs) are established to guide the entire cycle. The NSA and heads of intelligence agencies define the "Key Intelligence Topics" (KITs) and "Key Intelligence Questions" (KIQs) based on threats such as Boko Haram, banditry, kidnapping, and separatist movements. Once the direction has been set, the intelligence agencies begin to collect the necessary data to meet the guidance set out by policymakers.

Collection

This is the stage that sets the intelligence cycle in motion, without which subsequent stages cannot take place. It is the stage in which raw data/information from various sources is gathered. Information collected during this stage in Nigeria relies heavily on HUMINT (Human Intelligence), which often faces challenges from community mistrust or fear of reprisal. Other sources include SIGINT (Signal Intelligence), OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence), MASINT (Measurements and Signatures Intelligence), and increasingly, technological surveillance, such as GEOINT (Geospatial Intelligence) or IMINT (Imagery Intelligence) (e.g., satellite photography), although these are often hampered by outdated equipment. Data and information collected from many disciplines means that collectors can leverage the strengths and weaknesses of the disciplines to achieve optimal effects.

Processing

This involves the conversion of information collected from diverse sources (local dialects, signal intercepts) into intelligence, which includes language translation,

decryption of signals, data reduction, and organizing information into files or databases. It is carried out through three closely related steps: collection, evaluation, and interpretation. The evaluation step is to ensure the reliability of the source and credibility of information gathered, which is fundamental for analyzing the judgment of relative value to determine how different or conflicting the reports are. Interpretation is the final step in the processing phase. It focuses on deductive reasoning, body language, and existing materials, which play major roles in producing intelligence products. The processing stage is crucial for reducing the volume of information into manageable data for analysis to provide the most complete, accurate and objective view. For instance, analysts within agencies like the DIA or Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) contextualize data to identify patterns, evaluate the reliability of sources, and create actionable intelligence reports.

Dissemination and Use

This is the last stage of the intelligence cycle in Nigeria, where the finished intelligence product is delivered to policymakers and security operators. In Nigeria, intelligence is passed to consumers, such as the President, Service Chiefs, or Joint Task Force (JTF) commanders, as the case may be, for decision-making. It comes in the form of reports, briefings, or alerts shared with policymakers or commanders promptly to inform their decisions. Timeliness is critical here to enable proactive rather than reactive operations. At this stage, the consumers can evaluate the utility of intelligence; if it is not actionable, the cycle can be restarted for better planning and direction.

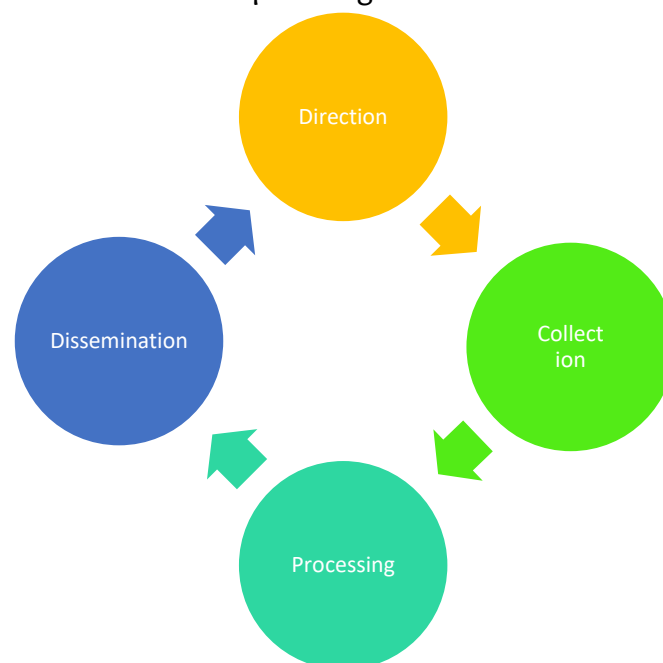


Figure 1: Nigeria's Intelligence Cycle Model. Source: Researcher's Design, 2026.

The Politicization of Intelligence in Nigeria

Intelligence politicization has been one of the major problems undermining national security in Nigeria since the post-independence to the present democratic era. It stems from inherited colonial governance structures, intense zero-sum political competition, frequent military interventions, and systemic corruption. Rather than operating as neutral protectors of national security, intelligence bodies have routinely been co-opted to serve incumbent regimes and factional interests at the detriment of national interest and national security. Although the intelligence landscape has overtime been restructured to ensure effective coordination of the intelligence bodies for enhance national security (from Decree 27 of 1976 to NSA Decree of 1986 and several other reforms on security sector governance), the structure has focus more on protecting the regimes rather than threats and vulnerabilities that tend to cripple or weaken national values, boundaries and institutions or the overall well-being of the citizens. This has resulted to several unsavoury tendencies in the dispensation of national security, including the manipulation of intelligence findings and security apparatuses to serve political interests rather than national security, resulting in flawed threat assessments, partisan targeting, and eroding of public trust in Nigerian security services. Agencies like the DSS, NIA, DIA, and the Nigerian Police often see the intelligence cycles distorted, leading to inefficiencies in the dispensation of national security objectives. Key aspects of this phenomenon include the following:

Partisan Framing of Security Threats

One major aspect of the phenomenon of intelligence politicization in Nigeria is the partisan framing of security threats. Political actors often exploit security crises, such as Boko Haram insurgencies or act of terrorism or farmer-herder conflicts, to downplay risks in specific regions or discredit political opponents, undermining impartial conflict resolution. Just like previous administrations, the current administration has accused and arrested some of the key opposition leaders for money laundering and terrorism financing. Recently, former Attorney General of the Federation under the previous administration, who defected to the opposition African Democratic Congress (ADC) was detained by DSS for terrorism financing and sabotage-related activities (Igbintade, 2025). Also, the former Governor of Kaduna State, Mallam El-Rufai (formerly a chieftain of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) and now a Chieftain of the rival ADC) was recently detained by the DSS on charges of unlawful tapping of the NSA phone line (Arise, 2026).

Institutional Capture & Regime Protection

In Nigeria, institutional capture and regime protection represent the structural and operational mechanisms by which intelligence agencies are diverted from national security to serve the interests of the political elite. Institutional capture occurs when political actors gain control over the leadership, recruitment, and funding of intelligence

agencies, transforming them into extensions of the ruling party or the presidency. When institutions of intelligence are captured, resources, intelligence, and enforcement power may be directed at political rivals rather than security threats, reducing public trust and institutional legitimacy (Bashir & Jibril, 2025). The leadership roles in agencies like the DSS and NIA are often filled based on political loyalty rather than professional merit for which it was known. This creates a leadership culture beholden to the appointing authority, which can lead to the “skipping of the line” in promotions and a breakdown of professional standards. Regime protection, on the other hand, is the prioritization of the survival and interests of the current administration over broader national security concerns. This often results in the manipulation of intelligence to favour the ruling elites’ interests as conceptualised by Mosca’s (1939) theory.

Manipulation and Suppression of Intelligence

This is a situation where intelligence findings are frequently altered or hidden to align with political agendas, creating a policy-based evidence scenario rather than evidence-based policy, as observed by the political-agent theorists. In such a situation, intelligence agents prioritize pleasing their political masters over national security interests, leading to abuse of intelligence (Nte, 2011: 1000). This weakens the ability of law enforcement to fight major security challenges. For instance, reports of high-profile security incidents, such as ransom payments for kidnapped students, are often dismissed as ‘fake’ by officials, despite conflicting reports from security experts. In addition, there is a recurring pattern in Nigeria where intelligence is used to ‘project a unified narrative’ that favours the government. This can involve downplaying security failures or framing incidents like the resurgence of the Boko Haram/ISWAP terrorist group in a way that minimizes political fallout for the administration.

Surveillance of Political Opposition and Media

In Nigeria, the surveillance of political opposition and media is a critical component of the politicization of intelligence, where security agencies are often perceived as prioritizing regime protection over national security and human rights such as freedom of speech. This manifests through the use of sophisticated digital tools, the weaponization of legislation, and physical intimidation (Feldstein, 2019; Yelwa & Umar, 2025). Daily Trust Editorial report of 27 July 2021, noted that intelligence agencies across 10 countries have invested heavily in technologies such as “Spyware” designed to intercept private communications, often without clear legal warrants, though Nigeria was not mentioned (Daily Trust, 2021). However, on its part, the Nigerian government has continued to increase budgetary allocations to surveillance technology. In 2021, the federal government allocated N4.8 billion to the NIA to procure equipment that will monitor WhatsApp messages, phone calls, and text messages (WIN, 2023). WIN report also reported that both federal and state-level actors have procured foreign hacker-for-hire spyware to monitor political opponents, particularly during election cycles, and more than ever before, journalists are monitored when they are online, and when they

are not, they are followed; journalists' email and social media handles are hacked (WIN, 2023). In the same vein, the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) 2025 report observed that in 2025, government officials and security agencies, including the DSS and Police, were reportedly responsible for approximately 74 per cent of all recorded violations of media freedom (APA News, 2025). This is also applicable to opposition political party leaders, a situation that has significantly affected intelligence management and altered the dispensation of national security.

Leadership and Institutional Disruption

Leadership and institutional disruption in Nigeria's intelligence sector are characterised by a 'revolving door' of leadership and the prioritization of political loyalty over institutional memory. This creates a cycle where agencies are frequently reorganized to suit the current administration, often at the expense of long-term strategic stability. Since 2023, the Nigerian President, Chief Bola Tinubu, has implemented multiple major reshuffles of security and intelligence chiefs, including a significant sweep in October 2025 (State House Press Release, 2025). Experts argue that while new appointments are framed as "injecting new blood" (Chibunna, 2025), they often lead to a loss of institutional memory. A persistent challenge is the appointment of intelligence leaders based on political, religious, or ethnic affiliations rather than professional qualifications. It undermines the independence and objectivity of these leadership positions, often resulting in biased decision-making that prioritizes career aspirations and the political survival of the regime over operational efficiency.

Weak Oversight and Accountability

Weak oversight and accountability are primary drivers of the politicization of intelligence, creating a "culture of secrecy" that allows agencies like the DSS and NIA to be used for regime protection rather than national security (Bashir & Jibril, 2025: 8983). Legislative oversight helps bridge the gap between citizens and government, supports effective security sector policy implementation, and builds public trust (Aluko, 2015; Dan-Azumi, 2020). So, when those who are expected to supervise the activities of intelligence agencies decide to ignore, it breeds a culture of impunity and entrenches partisan uses of security (Abdulrasheed, 2021). Despite massive security budgets reaching over N17 trillion between 2021 and 2025, there is often a lack of transparency in how these funds are utilized for intelligence, leading to recurring failures (The Cable, 2026). The Auditor-General's reports frequently highlight billions in unaccounted funds within the security sector, yet these findings rarely lead to prosecutions or structural changes (Gbahabo et al., 2024). The consequences have been the loss of public trust and declining operational efficiency.

National Security Implications of the Politicization of Intelligence In Nigeria

The politicization of intelligence in Nigeria significantly shifts the focus of security agencies from protecting the state to protecting the interests of political elites and/or regime security. This often manifests through the manipulation of threat assessments, partisan deployment during elections, and arbitrary and/or misuse of surveillance technology. This phenomenon frequently results in the weaponization of security institutions against political opposition, the neglect of urgent national security threats, and the erosion of public trust in state institutions. The key implications include:

Worsening Insecurity and Intelligence Failures

Worsening insecurity and intelligence failure are major implications of politicized intelligence. When intelligence focus shifts to political survival, national security is undermined. The rising increase in security challenges across the country is attributable to politicized intelligence. A good example is the recent spreading of violent extremism and kidnapping for ransom across the country despite the heavy presence of joint task operations ongoing in all the six geopolitical zones of the country (IWC, 2025). On Tuesday, February 3, 2026, Woro village in Kwara state was attacked by suspected bandits and over 170 persons were kidnapped and scores massacred, due to unheeded intelligence regarding the movement of bandits into the state after the United States bombing of their enclaves in the Northwest region of Nigeria on the eve of Christmas in 2025 (Omonobi et al., 2026). It was reported that the bandits had notified the village of the attack, which was communicated through a letter brought directly to the village head and sent to the DSS office in the state. Unfortunately, nothing was done to prevent the attack until it happened (Omonobi et al., 2026). Another striking incident is the abduction of 40 school students of Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School, Maga, Gombe State, by bandits in November 2025 (Abdullah, 2025). Incidentally, the incident happened 45 minutes after the withdrawal of troops guarding the school, but no one has come out to taken responsibility of withdrawing the troops from the school. Also, the Abuja-Kaduna train attack, which resulted in a mass kidnap-for-ransom scheme, was reportedly preceded by unheeded intelligence regarding the movement of bandits (EU-SDGN, 2023). These are incidents of politicized intelligence because there was evidence that security operatives had all intelligence to repel the attacks but chose to stay off, due to interests which definitely were not for the country's national security interest.

Erosion of Institutional Legitimacy and Public Trust

One major implication of the politicization of intelligence is that it weakens the legitimacy of state institutions and undermines public trust in the government's capacity to protect national interests. In Nigeria, reports have shown that intelligence agencies such as the DSS and Nigeria Police have been consistently used by successful governments for political repression, arresting of political opposition and dissent voices, monitoring opposition figures, and influencing election outcomes (Adebayo, 2020; Yiaga Africa, 2023; Igbintade, 2025). The implications have been the continuous loss of

institutional legitimacy and public trust. The public see them as an extended wings of the ruling party rather than national security apparatuses for safeguarding the state and citizens. This has reduced public willingness to share actionable information that can assist security agencies in containing the increasing insecurity across the country. The calls by several ethnic groups for people to take up arms and defend themselves against criminal herders across the country during President Muhammadu Buhari's administration were based on the perception that he was partial in addressing herders' attacks because they are his tribesmen (Premium Times, 2022; Channel Television, 2021).

Compromised Security Operations and Corruption

The politicization of intelligence in Nigeria has also led to compromised security operations and corruption among agencies. Budgetary allocations, including "security votes" are often mismanaged or diverted for political campaigns, leaving security operatives under-equipped and without the necessary tools for intelligence-driven operations. A striking example is the Dasuki-gate, where the NSA, Col. Dasuki (rtd.), under President Goodluck Jonathan, at the end of the administration, was arrested and prosecuted for diverting millions of dollars meant for the procurement of military hardware to political campaigns and political patronages for the president (Ukaeje, 2022). Another aspect of the implication is inter-agency rivalry between security agencies. Agencies like the Nigeria Police, DSS, and the military often refuse to share critical data/information to avoid being outshone or to protect their specific political patrons. This lack of synergy has been cited by many reports including CLEEN Foundation, 2019; IWC, 2025; Olugbode (2026); as a primary reason why, Nigeria continues to struggle with Boko Haram and ISWAP, as agencies operate in isolation to secure more operational resources. Additionally, it has entrenched rivalry among agencies that each is actively sabotaging the other to protect their "turf" or please political masters, preventing the necessary synergy for effective operations. Instances of sabotage by security agencies against each other are documented in several reports (Bodunde & Balogun, 2018; CLEEN Foundation, 2019; IWC, 2025).

Undermining Democracy and Rule of Law

Undermining democratic principles and the rule of law is another consequence of intelligence politicization. In Nigeria, security and intelligence agencies are often used by the ruling party to intimidate other arms of government, especially when they seem to stick to professionalism and not align with the political dictates of the ruling elites. Ordinary political issues are often elevated to national security threats to delegitimize opposition and justify illegal arrests or repression. In 2016, for instance, operatives of the Department of State Services carried out "sting operations", midnight raids on the homes of several senior judges, including Supreme Court Justices, over allegations of corruption. While the government framed it as an anti-corruption drive to purge the judiciary of corrupt judges, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and critics condemned

it as an effort towards intimidating the judiciary towards subverting the cause of justice to the favour of the ruling party (Thisday, 2016). In 2019 and 2023 General Elections, there were widespread reports of security agencies being used to provide cover for political thugs, snatch ballot boxes, or intimidate voters in opposition strongholds (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Specifically, academic studies on the 2023 elections in states like Oyo State highlights partisanship among security personnel, which directly discouraged voter participation and fuelled public distrust (Ikwuoma & Akinlabi, 2025). These are clear cases of where politicized intelligence has undermined democratic principles and rule of law. Incidentally, they have continued to play out unabated particularly in election of public officers.

Socio-Economic Dislocations

Another major implication of intelligence politicization is socioeconomic dislocations. In Nigeria, the unprofessional behaviour of security agencies in addressing serious security concerns, such as insurgency, terrorism, separatism, militancy, herders/farmers clash, and other security related matters due to consistent interference by the political elites has created severe socio-economic dislocations, including decline in economic growth and development, reduction in socio-economic investments, and humanitarian crises. The Nation Newspaper editorial of August 13, 2023 observed that banditry and terrorism in northern Nigeria have caused the displacement of an estimated 3.6 million persons at the end of 2022, with 40 per cent of the displaced persons living in 309 IDP Camps or camp-like settlements and 60 per cent in 2,072 host communities in Nigeria with severe consequences of food security (The Nation, 2023). Also, in the southeast geopolitical zone, the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) separatist sit-at-home order, restraining citizens across the entire southeast zone from doing business on Mondays has crippled the local economies in the states of region. The SB Morgan (2025) report on sit-at-home orders in southeast Nigeria revealed that the order has caused cumulative economic loss estimated at ₦7.6 trillion to ₦17 trillion between 2021 and 2025. This loss has severely impacted both the local and national economies including social livelihood of residents in the region.

Recommendations

Considering the aforementioned theory on intelligence and national security as well as the positioning of intelligence as a critical enabler of national security for a country, the following recommendations are proposed for Nigeria to curb the politicization of intelligence agencies:

- 1. Security of Tenure for Intelligence Chiefs:** The National Security Agencies Act (1986) should be amended to ensure that the Director-Generals of the DSS and NIA have a fixed, non-renewable term. Their removal should require a two-thirds majority in the Senate to prevent arbitrary dismissal for political reasons.
- 2. Legislative Oversight on Intelligence Agencies:** The National Assembly's Committee on Intelligence and Security must move beyond 'rubber-stamping' budgets. They should



conduct closed-door investigative hearings on operational failures and mandate detailed audit of Security Votes to ensure funds are not diverted for partisan activities. Nigeria should possibly establish a National Assembly Committee on Public Accounts to which all arms of government must report on spending of public funds.

3. Establishment of an Independent Oversight Body: Create an independent Intelligence Ombudsman or a civilian oversight board composed of retired jurists, academics, and security experts. This body would investigate complaints of human rights abuses and political surveillance without being tied to the executive branch of government. This should be included in a revision of the national legislation on intelligence in Nigeria.

4. Codifying Inter-Agency Cooperation: The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) should be legally empowered to enforce a unified intelligence-sharing protocol. Failure to share actionable intelligence between the police, military, and DSS should be categorized as professional misconduct subject to sanction.

5. Professionalization and Ethical Training: Intelligence training and education curricula should be overhauled to emphasize constitutionalism and the role of intelligence in a democracy. Operatives must be trained to distinguish between political opposition (which is legal) and subversion (which is criminal). Such professionalisation could follow the path which is associated with civil-military relations, maybe label it civil-intelligence relations.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis of the politicization of intelligence in Nigeria, it is obvious that the primary objective of intelligence in Nigeria, as established by the National Security Agencies Act of 1986 (as reviewed in 2004), which is the effective conduct of national security through the specialized mandates of three distinct agencies (DSS, NIA & DIA) has been abandoned or given little attention due to politics. The heads of intelligence agencies serve at the pleasure of the President, making them personally loyal to the individual rather than the office or the Constitution. Until the incentive structure changes, moving from rewarding political loyalty to rewarding professional efficacy, intelligence will remain a weapon of the ruling class rather than a shield for the citizenry. This 'intelligence capture' not only undermines the rule of law but also effectively privatizes national security, leaving the general population vulnerable to non-state actors.

Conflict of interest

The author hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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