2.8. Human rights defenders and activists

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Nigeria’s civil society is active and diverse, with NGOs generally free to form and operate.567 Civil society organisations have played important roles during elections and public protests, including the August-September 2024 protests. However, civic space in Nigeria has continued to decline throughout 2024, with increasing restrictions on public dissent, freedom of expression, and civil society activities,568 particularly through state surveillance and protest suppression. 569 Statistics from a DataPhyte report show that between 2016 and 2024, 570 civic space actors and institutions faced major crises, including physical violence as well as restrictive legislation and policies. 571 National security is cited as a key factor driving restrictions on civic rights in Nigeria, based on 14 years of civic space data from a Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) report.572

The North-Central region recorded the highest levels of civic space restrictions, driven by communal clashes, heavy military presence, and suppression of dissent, followed by the North-West, where insecurity and state-imposed measures have led to widespread arrests and shutdowns of communication services. The North-East faced ongoing restrictions due to insurgency, though civil society remains somewhat resilient. The southern regions reported relatively lower restrictions due to stronger civic institutions and greater media freedom.573 However, a Nigerian senior security advisor574 told the EUAA that, in the South-East region, the right to free speech by citizens, including traditional and religious leaders, has been severely curtailed by fears of arrests, abductions and killings by both government security forces and by pro-Biafra armed groups.575 For more information see 2.9. Members and perceived supporters of political parties and separatist movements.

Civil groups’ members ‘face intimidation and physical harm’, especially when speaking out against Boko Haram or probing military abuses.576 In January 2025, 67 Nigerian civil society organisations publicly denounced an escalation of crackdown on civic space, citing threats and harassment by security forces against activists, journalists, and NGOs.577 The government reportedly used the 2015 Cybercrimes Act to curb online publications and to arrest and detain activists and journalists for their online activity.578 For more information see Journalists and media workers.

Illustrative examples of incidents of harassment, detention, and criminalisation of activists include:

- In May 2024, a 33-year-old man in Adamawa State was arrested for allegedly misusing social media by posting an unsubstantiated TikTok video criticising public officials, which police said could incite unrest and damage reputations.579

- On 20 October 2024, during the #EndSARS580 memorial protest in Lagos, a nurse and activist was allegedly assaulted by police dispersing demonstrators with tear gas and force. She later posted a video online criticising top government figures, which led to her arrest on 13 December 2024. Authorities charged her under the Cybercrime Act for allegedly using the post 'to bully, threaten, and harass the person of Seyi Tinubu.'581

- In December 2024, a Nigerian lawyer and activist was released on bail after spending 20 days in detention over criminal defamation and cybercrime charges related to a book that alleged judicial corruption. The arrest followed a petition citing 31 allegedly defamatory excerpts from the publication.582

- On 23 May 2025, a coalition of civil society organisations (CSOs) demanded the immediate release and protection of an 18-year-old activist detained after criticising Sokoto Governor Ahmed Aliyu. She had faced repeated harassment, abduction, and detention, allegedly including physical abuse and being forcibly injected with unknown substances. She was initially abducted in November 2024, allegedly beaten and left injured, then rearrested and charged in a sharia court.583

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  The source is a Nigerian senior security advisor, working for an international research organisation that monitors conflict dynamics across the world. The source wished to remain anonymous for security and operational reasons.

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  Cable (The), CSOs demand release, protection of woman arrested for ‘criticising’ Sokoto governor, 23 May 2025, url; Premium Times, Coalition demands release, protection of woman detained after criticising Sokoto Governor, 24 May 2025, url

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