



## **Politicising Military Accountability in Nigeria: Legislative Reforms, Civil–Military Tension and National Security Implications**

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### **Abstract**

The politicisation of the Nigerian Armed Forces represents a critical threat to national security and democratic governance. This paper examines the implications of the Nigerian Senate's proposed amendment to the Armed Forces Act, which seeks to make military officers directly answerable to elected and appointed officials. The research is contextualised through the 2025 confrontation between the FCT Minister, Nyesom Wike, and the security officer attached to retired Chief of Naval Staff AVM AZ Gambo, a case that exemplifies the micro-level risks of political interference in military operations. The primary objective of this paper is to assess how political encroachment on military accountability affects professionalism, operational discipline and public trust in security institutions. The methodology is qualitative, relying on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, policy documents, news reports, and civil–military analyses. Content analysis was employed to interpret patterns of political interference and their implications for national security. Findings indicate that political actors' informal interventions compromise military neutrality, weaken chain-of-command discipline, and risk transforming the armed forces into instruments of partisan interest. The Wike–Gambo incident demonstrates how everyday administrative disputes, if influenced by political authority, can escalate into security and governance challenges. The paper concludes that the proposed amendment, if enacted, could institutionalise political control over military personnel, with severe implications for national security. Recommendations include reinforcing legal safeguards, enhancing professional training, strengthening oversight mechanisms, and promoting transparency in governance. This research contributes to knowledge by linking legislative proposals, individual political interventions, and systemic civil–military risks, offering empirical and theoretical insights for policymakers, scholars, and security practitioners on preserving military neutrality in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Armed Forces, civil–military relations, political interference, national security, military accountability, FCT land dispute.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, the question of how democratic governments should control their armed forces has long occupied scholars, policymakers and security institutions. In mature democracies such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany, civilian oversight is carefully balanced to preserve military professionalism while preventing political interference (Huntington, 1957; Harries-Jenkins, 1986). Where this balance breaks down, history shows deep institutional and political consequences. Latin American states in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Argentina and Chile, suffered severe human rights abuses and prolonged instability as their militaries became politicised arms of ruling elites (Angell & Britannica Editors, 2025; Dinges, 2007; Wright, 2006). Globally, the consensus remains that professional, apolitical armed forces are indispensable to democratic stability.

On the African continent, civil–military relations have been shaped by legacies of colonial command structures, post-independence authoritarianism and recurring coups. Between 1956 and 2001, Africa experienced over ninety successful or attempted coups (McGowan, 2003). Countries such as Ghana (1966, 1972, 1979, 1981), Uganda (1971, 1985) and Sierra Leone (1967, 1992, 1997) illustrate the chronic challenges associated with militaries drawn into political rivalry. Scholars such as Hutchful & Bathily (1998) and Williams (2016) argue that weak institutions, neopatrimonial politics and elite capture of security sectors have historically undermined the neutrality of African militaries. Within West Africa, regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union have increasingly emphasised the need to depoliticise armed forces, citing crises in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso between 2020 and 2022 as evidence of the dangers of military politicisation. The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) explicitly condemns any political interference with professional military standards, recognising that elite manipulation of security institutions remains one of the most persistent drivers of instability in the region (ECOWAS, 2001).

Nigeria provides one of the most compelling contemporary illustrations of these tensions. Having experienced six successful coups and several attempted and phantom ones between 1966 and 2025, Nigeria’s civil–military history is defined by oscillation between military dominance and fragile democratic control (Joseph, 1987). The return to civil rule in 1999 was accompanied by renewed efforts to strengthen constitutional oversight of the



armed forces. However, successive administrations have continued to rely on the military for internal security roles, counterinsurgency, anti-banditry, electoral security, which has blurred the boundaries between civil authority and military operations (Adekanye, 1999; Awuah, 2018). Public trust in Nigeria's security institutions remains precarious, with Mbaegbu & Duntoye (2023) reporting that fewer than half of Nigerians express confidence in security agencies.

It is within this complex national context that recent attempts by the Nigerian Senate to amend the Armed Forces Act, allowing soldiers to be directly answerable to elected and appointed officials (News Central TV, 2025, November 14), have raised serious concerns among scholars and practitioners of civil–military relations. Critics argue that such an amendment risks undermining the constitutional chain of command, creating opportunities for political actors to use the military as a tool for personal or partisan objectives. The contemporary relevance of this danger became evident in the now widely reported confrontation between the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nyesom Wike, and Lt. AM Yerima, a security officer attached to the former Chief of Naval Staff, AVM AZ Gambo (rtd). The dispute, which arose over alleged irregular land allocations and demolition orders in Abuja, escalated when the Minister allegedly attempted to reprimand or order the officer, despite lacking any military authority. Reports of intimidation and verbal confrontation highlighted how political actors may assume informal control over security personnel during administrative disputes. This clash, therefore, is not merely a disagreement over land or administrative procedure. It is emblematic of a wider structural problem: the increasing readiness of politicians to exert direct operational influence over military and paramilitary officers. When viewed against the legislative push to “rewire” military accountability, the incident provides a vivid micro-level case of the broader macro-level risks associated with the politicisation of Nigeria's armed forces.

It is against this backdrop of global insights, continental precedents, regional concerns, national fragilities and the specific Abuja confrontation that this paper interrogates the national security implications of attempts to shift Nigeria's military from a neutral force to a political instrument.



## 1.1 Conceptual Review

### *Ministry Versus Military*

The distinction between civilian ministries and the military is central to democratic governance and national security. “Ministry versus Military” reflects the principle that civilian authorities, including ministers and elected officials, are responsible for policy formulation, oversight, and governance, whereas the military executes defence and security operations within a formal chain of command (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960; Finer, 1962; Feaver, 2003; Baylis, 2008). Huntington (1957) stresses that professional militaries require objective civilian control, whereby civilians provide strategic direction and resources without interfering in operational matters. Janowitz (1960) similarly highlights the need for political neutrality to ensure operational decisions remain independent of partisan influence. Finer (1962) warns that blurred authority between ministries and the military creates opportunities for political manipulation, while Feaver’s (2003) principal–agent framework identifies risks when civilian directives are ambiguous or exceed constitutional bounds. Baylis (2008) notes that conflating ministerial authority with military operations undermines institutional credibility and governance. The 2025 confrontation between FCT Minister Nyesom Wike and the security officer assigned to retired Chief of Naval Staff AVM AZ Gambo exemplifies these risks (SaharaReporters, 2025; Odeniyi, Oyelakin, & Musa, 2025). Attempts by political actors to control military personnel compromise discipline, erode the chain of command, and politicise the armed forces. Maintaining a clear separation between ministries and military institutions is essential for professionalism, operational effectiveness, and public trust

### *Civil–Military Relations*

Civil–military relations refer to the structured interaction between civilian authorities and the military, encompassing authority, accountability, and oversight. Huntington (1957) defines it as the distribution of power between political leaders and military organisations, emphasising that professional militaries require objective civilian control to prevent politicisation. Janowitz (1960) frames it as balancing societal integration with military neutrality, asserting that legitimacy depends on adherence to professional norms while



responding to civilian guidance. Finer (1962) highlights structural conditions under which militaries may intervene in politics, particularly in contexts of weak institutions or fragmented civilian authority. Feaver (2003) applies a principal–agent perspective, warning that competing directives or informal pressures can undermine civilian control and military compliance. Baylis (2008) situates civil–military relations within broader security governance, noting that effective coordination between policymakers and the military is essential for national security and democratic stability. In Nigeria, historical and contemporary cases demonstrate the fragility of these relations. Military involvement in electoral crises in 1983 and the 2015 Rivers State conflict illustrates how political interference can compromise neutrality and public confidence (Joseph, 1987; Tar, Hassan & Musa, 2010). Similarly, the 2025 Wike–Gambo incident shows how administrative disputes, if politicised, can escalate into civil–military tension (Sahara Reporters, 2025). It is therefore deduced that safeguarding civil–military relations requires clear roles, respect for the chain of command, and institutionalised dispute mechanisms, as encroachments risk undermining professionalism, discipline, and public trust.

### ***Political Tool***

The concept of a political tool refers to state institutions or structures that are exploited by political actors to advance partisan, personal, or elite interests. Huntington (1957) conceptualises political manipulation of state institutions, including the military, as the subordination of professional bodies to partisan agendas, warning that such interference undermines institutional neutrality. Similarly, Bayart (1993) argues that in neo-patrimonial African states, public institutions are often appropriated by ruling elites to consolidate power and maintain patronage networks. Migdal (2001) emphasises that institutions become political tools when they are selectively used by state actors to enforce authority and extend control over society. Levitsky and Way (2010) highlight that such tools are central to sustaining hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes, while Ake (1996) notes that weak institutional autonomy in African states allows political elites to co-opt public agencies for personal or factional gain. Critically, the literature reveals that while political tools can ensure regime survival, their overuse erodes public trust, reduces institutional effectiveness, and compromises governance. In contemporary Nigeria,



instances such as selective enforcement of laws or interference in security deployments illustrate the operationalisation of political tools. From this discussion, political tools in this paper are understood as state institutions whose autonomy is compromised, allowing political actors to use them for partisan or personal objectives rather than the public interest.

### ***National Security***

National security has transformed from a concept narrowly focused on military defence to a multidimensional framework that encompasses political stability, economic resilience, and the protection of citizens. The Heritage Foundation (2014) defines national security not only in terms of safeguarding the nation's defence capabilities but also as the protection of broader geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests. The Foundation emphasises that defence and foreign policy should be mutually reinforcing rather than treated as competing priorities, and that national security decisions should be informed by practical realities rather than partisan or incoherent interpretations. Baldwin (1997) similarly highlights the importance of defending vital national interests, while Baylis (2008) expands the scope to include societal and economic dimensions alongside traditional military functions. Nye (2004) further adds the role of soft power, social cohesion, and institutional trust as essential elements of security.

Contemporary scholarship, including Musa (2023b) and Musa and Bayero (2024), introduces the human security perspective, arguing that structural violence, weak governance, and institutional fragility also pose significant threats to national security. Such perspectives challenge traditional militaristic approaches, particularly in states where political interference and institutional weaknesses exacerbate instability. Nigeria exemplifies this complexity: insurgency in the northeast, widespread banditry in the northwest, and repeated politicisation of military operations illustrate that security cannot be ensured by military means alone. Events such as the confrontation between FCT Minister Nyesom Wike and the security officer attached to retired Chief of Naval Staff AVM AZ Gambo highlight the dangers of political intrusion into military affairs, which can compromise both institutional neutrality and operational effectiveness.



For this paper, national security is defined as the protection of the Nigerian state, its institutions, and its citizens from threats arising from political interference, institutional decay, structural violence, and social instability. This broad understanding recognises that effective national security requires not only military capability but also robust governance, adherence to institutional norms, and insulation of security agencies from partisan influence, thereby preserving stability, professional integrity, and public trust.

### ***Nigerian Senate***

The Nigerian Senate, as the upper chamber of the National Assembly, plays a critical role in legislation, oversight, and federal representation. Elaigwu (2005) emphasises its constitutional mandate to provide checks and balances, while Musa (2023a) highlights its importance in consolidating democratic governance and balancing federal interests. Binder (2011), Daminov (2025), Flynn and Harbridge (2016) stress that the Senate is also a forum for elite bargaining and political contestation, reflecting both legislative and partisan dynamics. Bature and Musa (2023), Manu, Musa, and Myatafadi (2010) critiques the Senate's vulnerability to executive dominance and internal patronage, which can limit its effectiveness in oversight. In the context of the Armed Forces Act amendment, the Senate's actions illustrate the dual nature of the institution: formally tasked with oversight, yet potentially contributing to politicisation if legislative authority is exercised to extend political influence over the military. For this paper, the Nigerian Senate is defined as a constitutionally empowered legislative body whose decisions and political dynamics significantly shape governance and national security outcomes.

### ***Military Accountability***

Military accountability refers to the mechanisms, norms, and institutional structures that ensure armed forces remain professional, apolitical, and subordinate to legitimate civilian authority. Feaver (2005) conceptualises it as a set of mechanisms ensuring civilian oversight while preserving military professionalism, whereas Huntington (1957) frames accountability as the balance between objective civilian control and professional autonomy. Janowitz (1960) underscores the military's social responsibility and integration into democratic norms, while Bruneau and Matei (2008) highlight the role of



parliamentary oversight, judiciary supervision, and civil society participation in enforcing accountability. Lindberg (2010) situates accountability in the African context, pointing to persistent challenges of political interference under neopatrimonial systems. Critical analysis reveals that military accountability is undermined when political actors bypass chains of command, impose informal directives, or manipulate security institutions for personal or partisan gain. In Nigeria, episodes such as the confrontation between the FCT Minister, Nyesom Wike, and the security officer attached to AVM AZ Gambo (rtd) exemplify the risks of eroded accountability. This paper therefore defines military accountability as the democratic structures, norms, and institutional processes that ensure the armed forces operate professionally, remain apolitical, and are subordinate to constitutional authority rather than individual political actors.

### **The FCT Minister and Land Disputes: Balancing Bureaucratic Procedure and Conflict Prevention**

Land administration within Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FCT) has long constituted a sensitive arena of governance, marked by recurring administrative frictions, socio-economic contestations and, at times, civil–military tensions. The allocation, control and regulation of land in Abuja are structured around a formal bureaucratic framework intended to promote legality, equity and orderly urban development. When these established procedures are circumvented, particularly through informal or personalized interventions by political authorities, the credibility of state institutions is weakened, often transforming routine administrative disagreements into wider governance crises (MBK Alliance, 2025; Tar, Manu, & Musa, 2014; Hassan & Musa, 2010).

The confrontation involving the FCT Minister, Nyesom Wike, and a security officer attached to a retired Chief of Naval Staff offers a compelling illustration of these dynamics. Available reports suggest that the Minister personally visited a disputed construction site located at Plot 1946 in the Gaduwa District, land allegedly associated with Vice Admiral Awwal Zubairu Gambo (rtd), and sought to halt or reverse ongoing developments reportedly undertaken by military personnel (Jimoh, 2025; Opinion Nigeria, 2025). The refusal of the security officer to comply, on the grounds of existing formal directives, precipitated a verbal confrontation that was recorded and subsequently



circulated widely across traditional and social media platforms (*TVC News Nigeria*, 2025, November 11; *TVC News*, 2025, November 12; Igbonwelundu & Omokhunu, 2025). This episode underscores the broader governance risks inherent in bypassing institutionalized land administration processes. Beyond undermining bureaucratic norms and due process, such actions risk recasting administrative disputes as civil–military confrontations, thereby introducing avoidable tensions with potential implications for public order and national security.

Investigations reveal that approximately 30 hectares of land, originally allocated to serving and retired military personnel, were revoked by Minister Wike and reallocated to political associates (*SaharaReporters*, 2025; Mojeed, 2025). Legal practitioners assert that the revocation and reallocation were executed “in total disregard of due process, official recommendations, and existing approvals” (*SaharaReporters*, 2025; Mojeed, 2025). The episode highlights a critical point of friction in civil–military relations: civilian overreach into areas traditionally governed by military protocol and professional autonomy (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2005). Military officers, including Capt. Adam Yariman, were confronted by a politically powerful civilian accompanied by armed police and bulldozers, exemplifying the risks of informal political interference in operational security (Finer, 1962; Janowitz, 1960).

Beyond the immediate confrontation, the case raises systemic questions about governance and institutional integrity. Historical and contemporary evidence from Nigeria indicates that political manipulation of military involvement in civil matters has significant consequences. Previous instances, such as the deployment of soldiers during the 1983 elections and the Rivers State political crisis in 2015, demonstrate how such interference undermines professionalism, impartiality, and public trust (Joseph, 1987; Tar, Manu, & Musa, 2014; Hassan & Musa, 2010). The revocation of land initially designated as parkland, its subsequent reclassification as multi-purpose, and the issuance of fresh Rights of Occupancy to politically connected individuals indicate a pattern of discretionary governance that privileges elite interests over procedural norms (*SaharaReporters*, 2025; Mojeed, 2025). Civil–military theory underscores that clearly defined boundaries, respect for the chain of command, and institutionalised dispute-resolution mechanisms are vital



for maintaining professional neutrality in the armed forces (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). By bypassing approvals and ignoring memos, Minister Wike allegedly circumvented bureaucratic and judicial processes, prompting the military to insist on legal adjudication. This confrontation exemplifies the dangers of informal power exertion: it erodes professional discipline, undermines command protocols, and sets a precedent for political actors to treat military personnel as instruments of personal or partisan authority (Feaver, 2005; Hutchful & Bathily, 1998).

The case also reflects the broader governance challenge of neo-patrimonial influence in African politics, where personal loyalty frequently overrides institutional norms (Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Ake, 1996). Civil–military scholars contend that such patterns compromise legitimacy, weaken public trust, and increase the risk of institutional conflict (Williams, 2016; Baylis, 2008). Historically, land disputes in Abuja and other urban centres, especially in the early 2000s, led to legal battles, forced evictions, and confrontations involving state security agencies, highlighting the necessity of adherence to bureaucratic protocols (Global Land Tool Network, 2013; Awuah, 2018).

From a conflict-prevention perspective, transparent, consistent, and accountable bureaucratic processes reduce the likelihood of disputes escalating into violence or civil–military confrontation (Hutchful & Bathily, 1998; Baylis, 2008). The Wike–Gambo episode demonstrates the fragility of these safeguards in Nigeria, highlighting the importance of institutional mechanisms that protect civil servants and security personnel from partisan pressures. Thus, the FCT land dispute serves as a microcosm of Nigeria’s broader civil–military and governance challenges. It underscores the tension between political authority and bureaucratic procedure, the risks associated with informal interventions by powerful actors, and the critical need for institutionalised conflict-prevention measures. The incident provides a contemporary case study demonstrating how breaches of protocol and politicisation of security personnel can threaten national security, compromise institutional integrity, and erode public trust.



### Senate Bill and Civil–Military Relations: A Closer Look

The Nigerian Senate has proposed a bill to repeal and re-enact the Armed Forces Act, seeking to modernise military governance and deepen civilian accountability (Ukwu, 2025; Ogundapo, 2025; *Our Reporter*, 2025, November 14). This reform signifies a potential shift in civil–military relations, with the Senate emphasising that the Armed Forces must operate under legal frameworks that are consistent with Nigeria’s constitution and democratic principles (Akubo, 2025). At the heart of the debate is civilian oversight. The bill introduces a provision subjecting military tribunal convictions to review by civil courts, which many see as a major step toward limiting unchecked military autonomy and reinforcing judicial accountability (Ukwu, 2025). Proponents argue this would prevent abuse of power within military justice and ensure fairness, aligning military discipline with the broader rule of law (Umoru, 2025; *Our Reporter*, 2025, November 14). Another central feature is the proposed clarification of the chain of command and the role of civilian authorities. While the President would remain the Commander-in-Chief, the bill explicitly vests day-to-day operational command in the Chief of the Defence Staff, thereby reinforcing civilian supremacy over the military without undermining professional military leadership (Umoru, 2025; *Our Reporter*, 2025, November 14). Debate in the House of Representatives also reflects concerns about accountability, with lawmakers calling for clearer roles for the Forces Council, the Minister of Defence, and the Service Chiefs to ensure efficiency and prevent political overreach (Akintola, 2025).

Importantly, the bill criminalises undue interference in courts-martial by senior officers, a reform designed to protect the independence of military justice (Aborisade, 2025; *ARISE News*, 2025, November 14). This aligns with the broader goal of strengthening civil–military accountability, ensuring that military discipline is not subject to arbitrary political or command influence. From a civil–military relations perspective, these changes signal a recalibration of power: civilians gain stronger legal mechanisms to supervise military activities, while the military retains operational autonomy within a more transparent legal framework. Scholars of legislative oversight in Nigeria emphasise the importance of such reforms, as effective parliamentary supervision can foster stable civil–military relations and prevent the recurrence of past abuses (Amadi, 2024; Kazeem, 2013). However, critics



warn of potential risks. Expanding civilian oversight may blur boundaries in operational command, potentially leading to politicisation of military decisions or weakening of military efficiency. Balancing civilian control with professional autonomy remains a delicate task, one that will define the future of Nigeria's democratic-military equilibrium.

### 1.3 Theoretical Perspectives

This study utilises multiple theoretical perspectives to analyse the national security implications of the Nigerian Senate's proposed amendment to the Armed Forces Act, with particular reference to the 2025 confrontation between the FCT Minister, Nyesom Wike, and the security officer attached to former Chief of Naval Staff, AVM AZ Gambo (rtd). Huntington's Theory of Objective Civilian Control (1957) posits that militaries remain professional, neutral, and operationally effective when separated institutionally from politics and supervised through structured civilian oversight rather than day-to-day interference. The Senate's proposed amendment, which would make military officers directly answerable to elected and appointed officials, conflicts with this principle. The Wike–Gambo incident illustrates the dangers of subjective civilian control, where political actors bypass the chain of command, risking politicisation and institutional instability (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2005). Finer's Theory of Military Intervention in Politics (1962) emphasises that militaries are vulnerable to political manipulation when civilian authority is weak or fragmented, a dynamic evident in Nigeria's history of coups (1966–1999).

Janowitz's Constabulary Force Theory (1960) underscores the military's role in internal security while maintaining neutrality, yet interventions such as the Wike confrontation compromise professionalism and legitimacy (Janowitz, 1960; Baylis, 2008). Collectively, these perspectives reveal how political overreach threatens operational discipline, military neutrality, and national security. Additional frameworks further illuminate the structural and behavioural dimensions of civil–military relations. Elite Theory (Pareto, Mosca, Mills) demonstrates that political elites often seek control over coercive institutions to consolidate power, as reflected in historical cases of electoral manipulation and regime protection (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935; Mills, 1956). Principal–Agent Theory conceptualises the military as an agent subordinate to civilian principals, highlighting



risks when authority is fragmented or misapplied, evident in the Wike–Gambo incident (Feaver, 2005; Bruneau & Matei, 2008). Security Governance Theory examines competition over control of security resources, relevant to Nigeria’s fragmented security architecture comprising the military, police, paramilitary units, and vigilante forces (Baldwin, 1997; Krahnemann, 2003). Neo-Patrimonialism explains how personal loyalty often supersedes institutional norms, with the incident demonstrating informal expectations of political subservience by security personnel (Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Ake, 1996).

Together, these frameworks illustrate the risks of politicising the armed forces, emphasising the need for institutional safeguards, professional training, and clear boundaries between political authority and military accountability to preserve operational effectiveness and national security.

#### **1.4 Discussion on Findings**

The confrontation between the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nyesom Wike, and the security officer attached to the retired Chief of Naval Staff, AVM A. Z. Gambo, offers a compelling and instructive case study of civil–military tension in contemporary Nigeria. According to multiple reports, the Minister personally arrived at a disputed construction site in Abuja, accompanied by security personnel, and issued directives for the demolition of structures he considered irregularly erected. The security officer, adhering to existing military orders and formal directives, declined to comply, which escalated into a verbal confrontation. During this exchange, the Minister allegedly referred to the officer as “a fool,” to which the officer responded, “I am not a fool, I am a soldier”. This interaction vividly illustrates the friction that can arise at the intersection of civilian authority and military professionalism, highlighting the delicate balance required to sustain effective civil–military relations in a democratic context (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). The incident exemplifies how even minor administrative disputes, when politicized, can escalate into confrontations with significant implications for institutional integrity, operational discipline, and national security.



Civilian oversight of the military is both legitimate and indispensable in democratic governance. Such oversight ensures that the armed forces remain subordinate to elected officials while safeguarding the state's national interests and the primacy of civilian authority (Feaver, 2005). However, the direct engagement of a political officeholder with a security officer over an administrative matter such as land allocation raises serious concerns regarding the overextension of civilian authority and potential abuse of office. Issuing directives to serving military personnel outside formal chains of command undermines professional military norms and blurs the distinction between political authority and military command. In this respect, the incident resonates with broader debates surrounding proposed amendments to Nigeria's Armed Forces Act, which seek to make military officers directly answerable to elected and appointed officials. Critics warn that such reforms risk entrenching practices that weaken the chain of command, erode professionalism, and invite political interference into operational and security matters (National Defense University, 2021; *Kanari Media*, 2025, November 12). Historical precedent in Nigeria further underscores the gravity of these risks. The politicisation of military forces during the 1983 elections and subsequent coups between 1966 and 1999 demonstrates the dangers inherent in conflating personal political power with military authority (Finer, 1962; Joseph, 1987). These historical experiences reveal that even seemingly procedural encounters, such as the Wike–Gambo confrontation, can reflect deeper structural vulnerabilities in the governance architecture.

The episode also exposes the inherent vulnerability of military protection units assigned to politically prominent individuals, particularly retired service chiefs. Officers within these units are trained to operate with strict neutrality, guided by formal military directives rather than political considerations. Yet, when politically influential actors publicly confront or attempt to exert control over these officers, psychological and operational pressures emerge that may compromise their impartiality. In such situations, officers may feel compelled to align with the preferences of powerful civilians to avoid potential sanctions or reprisals, even when such alignment conflicts with military orders (Bruneau & Matei, 2008). This dynamic represents an early stage of the politicisation of military protection units, a process that undermines institutional integrity, erodes public trust, and destabilises civil–military relations. Comparative experiences across West Africa further



illustrate the consequences of such politicisation. When military forces become entangled in partisan disputes, even at the level of administrative or local conflicts, professional norms gradually erode, and broader civil–military equilibrium is destabilised (Hutchful & Bathily, 1998; Williams, 2016). These patterns demonstrate that the Wike–Gambo incident is emblematic of structural tensions that extend well beyond the immediate issue of land allocation, highlighting the risks of civilian overreach and the susceptibility of security personnel to political pressures.

Beyond the immediate operational concerns, the confrontation foreshadows broader dangers to national security, particularly in light of proposals to amend the Armed Forces Act to allow elected officials direct control over military officers. Military professionalism is fundamentally predicated on impartiality, with armed forces serving the state as an institution rather than individual political actors (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). The Wike–Gambo confrontation demonstrates the fragility of this impartiality, showing how political power can be leveraged to influence operational decisions. Historical instances in Nigeria, including the selective deployment of soldiers during electoral crises and political disputes, reveal how easily the military can be co-opted for partisan purposes when civilian oversight extends beyond constitutional limits (Joseph, 1987; Hassan & Musa, 2014; Musa, 2023a). If micro-level confrontations like the one between Minister Wike and AVM Gambo are left unchecked, they could set precedents for the utilisation of military resources in politically motivated operations, such as land disputes, electoral manipulation, or targeted enforcement actions, ultimately threatening the neutrality and professionalism of the armed forces.

The centralised chain of command within the Nigerian military is designed to ensure accountability, discipline, and operational coherence (Feaver, 2005; Bruneau & Matei, 2008). When civilian officials bypass this structure to issue directives directly to military personnel, professional conduct is undermined, operational confusion arises, and divided loyalties emerge. Officers find themselves navigating competing pressures between following formal military orders and appeasing politically influential civilians. The Wike–Gambo incident thus serves as a concrete example of what can occur when legislative reforms empower politicians to intervene directly in military operations. Such interference



threatens not only the effectiveness of security operations but also the broader integrity of national defence institutions, reinforcing warnings by scholars regarding the destabilising potential of politicised military control.

Additionally, the incident illustrates the potential normalisation of political interference in military affairs. Repeated confrontations between civilian officials and military officers, if left unaddressed, risk institutionalising such behaviours, especially under legislative reforms that formalise civilian control over military operations. Over time, political actors may feel entitled to “discipline” officers or issue directives in matters outside their constitutional authority, gradually transforming the military from a neutral, professional institution into a political instrument. Comparative evidence from West Africa, including political manipulation of security forces in Mali and Burkina Faso between 2020 and 2022, demonstrates the long-term consequences of institutionalised interference. Such practices undermine professionalism, reduce public trust, and heighten civil–military tension (Williams, 2016; Hutchful & Bathily, 1998). By capturing the dynamics of this confrontation, the Wike–Gambo episode provides a microcosmic insight into potential macro-level threats to Nigeria’s security and governance systems, emphasising the urgency of safeguards to protect military neutrality and reinforce the chain of command.

The confrontation also underscores the fragility of military discipline in the face of competing loyalties. Professional soldiers are trained to obey lawful commands within the formal chain of command, yet political pressures place them in a dilemma: comply with formal directives or yield to politically influential civilians. Scholars such as Huntington (1957) and Feaver (2005) highlight that such scenarios erode discipline, compromise operational integrity, and cultivate a culture where loyalty to political figures can override institutional norms. Over time, this environment risks transforming the military into a politically motivated entity rather than an apolitical guarantor of national security. Public confidence in security institutions is similarly jeopardised. When political actors can informally influence military personnel, citizens may perceive these institutions as instruments of partisan agendas rather than neutral enforcers of law and order. Reports indicate that fewer than half of Nigerians trust national security institutions, reflecting



longstanding concerns about politicisation, abuse of authority, and institutional manipulation (Mbaegbu & Duntoye, 2023). Incidents such as the Wike–Gambo confrontation thus have implications that extend beyond immediate operational concerns, affecting public perceptions of legitimacy, impartiality, and institutional competence.

The verbal dimension of the incident, including the use of derogatory language, has further significant implications for military professionalism. Military discipline and professionalism are anchored in adherence to ethical standards, respect for hierarchy, and operational competence (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). When political actors publicly demean officers, such principles are undermined, weakening both internal morale and public perception of the armed forces. Verbal abuse, such as referring to an officer as “a fool,” diminishes authority, erodes morale, and challenges the professional identity of military personnel. Officers subjected to such treatment may experience stress, resentment, or reluctance to follow orders, particularly when directives from lawful superiors conflict with pressures from politically powerful civilians. This situation compromises the effective functioning of the chain of command and fosters a culture where political obedience supersedes professional duty (Feaver, 2005). Over time, repeated exposure to derogatory treatment may normalise the influence of political figures in operational decisions, further eroding professionalism and institutional integrity.

Beyond these immediate consequences, the incident provides broader lessons for the protection of national security in Nigeria. It highlights the structural vulnerabilities in civil–military relations and underscores the risks posed by informal or institutionalised political interference. If left unaddressed, such encounters could escalate from localized administrative disputes to larger crises with political, social, and security ramifications. Historical experience demonstrates that politicised military action in Nigeria, including selective deployment during elections and targeted enforcement in politically sensitive areas, can destabilise governance, exacerbate insecurity, and erode citizen trust (Joseph, 1987; Ojo, 2021). The Wike–Gambo confrontation thus exemplifies how micro-level interactions between political actors and military personnel can foreshadow macro-level threats, reinforcing the need for robust safeguards, legal frameworks, and institutional accountability mechanisms.



Finally, the incident underscores the importance of maintaining the military as a neutral, professional institution. The confrontation illustrates multiple interconnected risks, including the erosion of impartiality, breakdown of command protocols, normalisation of political interference, weakening of discipline, and declining public trust. It demonstrates the profound consequences of verbal abuse and intimidation by political figures, revealing how such dynamics can foster vulnerability to partisan exploitation. Taken together, these factors emphasise that without strong ethical safeguards, institutional mechanisms, and clear boundaries between civilian and military roles, Nigeria risks transforming its armed forces from a neutral guarantor of state security into a political instrument. The Wike–Gambo confrontation thus serves as both a warning and a lesson, illustrating the urgent need for policies, legislation, and institutional practices that reinforce military professionalism, accountability, and the integrity of national security institutions. By examining this micro-level incident, scholars and policymakers gain valuable insight into broader systemic challenges, providing a foundation for improving civil–military relations and safeguarding democratic governance in Nigeria.

### **1.5 Conclusion**

The examination of the confrontation between FCT Minister Nyesom Wike and the security officer attached to retired Chief of Naval Staff AVM AZ Gambo serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges facing Nigerian civil–military relations. This incident illustrates how political actors can overstep their authority, encroaching on the operational autonomy and professionalism of military personnel. When considered alongside the Nigerian Senate’s proposed amendment to the Armed Forces Act, which seeks to make soldiers directly answerable to elected and appointed officials, the episode underscores the potential risks of politicising the armed forces. From a national security perspective, the Wike–Gambo case highlights three critical implications. First, it demonstrates the erosion of military impartiality, as officers may be pressured to comply with politically motivated directives rather than lawful commands. Second, it reveals the vulnerability of the military chain of command, where competing authorities could foster divided loyalties, weaken discipline, and undermine operational efficiency. Third, such encounters erode public trust in security institutions, reinforcing perceptions that the



military and paramilitary agencies can be manipulated for partisan objectives (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2005; Mbaegbu & Duntoye, 2023).

Ultimately, this incident provides tangible evidence that concerns about politicisation and the potential transformation of the Nigerian Armed Forces into a political instrument are not merely theoretical. It reflects systemic challenges rooted in weak institutional safeguards, informal patronage networks, and the persistent influence of elite interests over coercive state institutions.

## 1.6 Recommendations

1. ***Strengthen Institutional Safeguards:*** Reinforce constitutional and legal frameworks to clearly delineate the chain of command and prevent political actors from issuing operational directives to military personnel outside formal procedures.
2. ***Professionalise Military and Security Agencies:*** Invest in continuous training on ethics, neutrality, and adherence to lawful orders, particularly for personnel assigned to VIP protection and internal security operations.
3. ***Legislative Oversight and Review:*** Conduct rigorous reviews of the proposed Armed Forces Act amendment to ensure it does not formalise political interference, and create parliamentary oversight mechanisms to monitor civil–military relations.
4. ***Conflict Prevention Mechanisms:*** Implement protocols for resolving administrative disputes, such as land allocation, through bureaucratic and legal channels rather than direct intervention by political actors.
5. ***Public Awareness and Transparency:*** Promote transparency in governance and security operations to build public trust, ensuring citizens are informed about the independence of security institutions from partisan pressures.
6. ***Strengthen Accountability Frameworks:*** Establish independent oversight bodies to investigate breaches of military neutrality or incidents where civilian authority is overstepped, ensuring consequences for violations.



By adopting these measures, Nigeria can safeguard the professional neutrality of its armed forces, reinforce the integrity of civil–military relations, and reduce the risk of internal conflicts being exacerbated by political interference. The Wike–Gambo incident, while specific, provides lessons applicable to broader governance and national security frameworks across the country.

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