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**Why Africa Can Not Afford To See Nigeria Fail  
As A State**



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

States rarely fail suddenly; rather, state failure often develops through the accumulation of economic, political, social and security pressures that weaken the relationship between citizens and state institutions. Nigeria currently faces several interconnected challenges, including economic hardship, insecurity, youth frustration, declining public confidence and separatist mobilisation. While these challenges do not necessarily indicate state failure, their convergence raises concerns about the resilience of Nigeria's political and institutional order. Given Nigeria's central position in Africa, serious deterioration in its state capacity could have consequences beyond its borders through migration, trade, insecurity, organised crime and regional political instability. This article therefore examines why Nigeria cannot afford to fail as a state, focusing on how its domestic challenges could affect the wider stability and resilience of West Africa and the African continent.

## NIGERIA'S STRATEGIC WEIGHT IN AFRICA

Nigeria occupies a position in Africa that few other states can easily replicate. Its importance is derived not from a single attribute but from the combination of its population, geographical scale, economic weight, natural resources, political influence, military capacity, cultural reach and historical role in regional diplomacy. Estimates based on the United Nations' *World Population Prospects 2024* indicate that Nigeria was projected to record approximately 7.64 million births in 2025, compared with about 6.3 million births across Europe as a whole. India and China were the only countries projected to record more births individually (see Neufeld, 2025; Law and society Magazine, 2026). The significance of this comparison is not simply that Nigeria is growing rapidly. It is that country that is becoming an increasingly important component of Africa's future population, workforce and consumer market (World Bank Group, 2025a). This demographic weight creates both an opportunity and a risk. If Nigeria can convert its growing population into productive human capital through education, employment, entrepreneurship as well as effective public services, its demographic expansion can become an economic asset. If, however, large sections of the population experience unemployment, insecurity, exclusion and declining living standards, the same demographic expansion can intensify social pressure.

Nigeria's economic importance is equally difficult to ignore. Its oil resources have historically provided a major source of export earnings and government revenue, while its large domestic market has supported substantial activity in telecommunications, banking, retail, entertainment, manufacturing and services. The country held approximately 37.5 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves in 2024 (Worldometers, n.d). Nigeria's significance extends beyond oil. The country's economy is deeply

connected to neighbouring markets and regional trade networks. As a result, Omoshoro-Jones & Bonga-Bonga in 2021 found evidence that economic shocks originating in Nigeria can spill over into regional economic blocs, including ECOWAS, particularly through trade channels. This is important because it demonstrates that Nigeria's economic trajectory does not remain contained within Nigeria's territorial borders.

This makes Nigeria more than an ordinary member of the African state system. It is a major pillar of West Africa's political and economic architecture (Kwaja, 2023). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) itself identifies Nigeria as the largest economy in the region. ECOWAS's regional outlook has estimated that Nigeria accounts for approximately 62.7 percent of regional GDP (ECOWAS/CEDEAO, 2025). Nigeria is also the host of the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja, placing the country physically and institutionally at the centre of West African regional integration.

## **ECONOMIC CHALLENGES**

Nigeria currently faces a difficult contradiction. Its macroeconomic position has shown signs of improvement while many households continue to experience severe economic hardship. The World Bank reported that Nigeria's economy grew by 3.9 percent year-on-year in the first half of 2025, with improvements in external reserves, current-account balances and non-oil activity. Yet it simultaneously warned that these macroeconomic improvements had not translated sufficiently into better living conditions (World Bank Group, 2025b). The poverty statistics illustrate the scale of the problem. The World Bank's October 2025 Poverty and Equity Brief estimated that 41.8 percent of Nigerians were living below the international poverty line of \$3 per day in 2022/23, while its projections indicated that more than half of Nigerians could be living in poverty in 2025. The same assessment identified major spatial disparities, with poverty substantially higher in northern Nigeria than in the southern zones (World Bank Group, 2025c). This matters for state stability because economic deprivation does not automatically produce violence or political instability. However, when economic hardship intersects with weak institutions, insecurity, unemployment, perceived exclusion and declining trust in government, it can generate a much more difficult political environment. When those pathways are absent, social frustration can acquire political expression.

## **INSECURITY AND THE EROSION OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE**

Nigeria's security crisis represents perhaps the most immediate challenge to state authority. The country simultaneously confronts several forms of insecurity: Islamist insurgency in the North-East, armed banditry and kidnapping in the North-West and North-Central regions, farmer-herder violence, communal conflict, separatist-related violence and other forms of organised criminality. ACLED (n.d) describes Nigeria as confronting an overlapping security environment involving Boko Haram, ISWAP, armed

banditry, cult and political militias, farmer-pastoralist conflicts and separatist violence. It also reports that abductions in Nigeria increased in 2025, with bandit groups, Islamist organisations and separatist actors using kidnapping as a source of revenue or leverage.

The economic consequences of insecurity are considerable. Kidnapping does not merely endanger individuals; it affects farming, education, investment, transportation and local markets. Ayegbusi (2024), for example, argues that kidnapping associated with armed banditry has consequences for national security, food security, education and economic activity, while also warning that military responses alone are unlikely to provide long-term security. The scale of the problem is reflected in Nigerian crime data. The ICIR reported in January 2025 that Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics Crime Experience and Security Perception Survey estimated 51.89 million crime incidents during the survey period and approximately N2.23 trillion paid in ransom to kidnappers. (ICIR, 2025). The deeper danger is therefore not simply the presence of criminals or armed groups. It is the possibility that citizens begin to perceive the state as unable to perform one of its most fundamental functions: providing security. This is where insecurity becomes a question of state legitimacy.

A state does not maintain legitimacy merely because it possesses police officers, soldiers, courts and administrative institutions. It must also be perceived as capable of protecting citizens and enforcing rules. Where citizens increasingly turn to vigilantes, community defence groups, private security or informal negotiations with armed groups because formal institutions appear inaccessible or ineffective, authority becomes fragmented.

## **SEPARATISM AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL COHESION**

Nigeria's state cohesion is also challenged by separatist movements rooted in historical grievances and questions of political inclusion. The 1967–1970 Biafran War remains central to Nigeria's political history, while contemporary groups such as MASSOB and IPOB continue to advance demands for Biafran self-determination. The UK Government (2026) notes that these movements are influenced by perceptions of marginalisation and unfair treatment among sections of the Igbo population. Thus, separatism reflects broader concerns about political representation, ethnic identity, historical grievances, resource distribution and the legitimacy of Nigeria's federal system. At the same time, Nigeria can draw lessons from other African experiences of separatism. The independence of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011 followed prolonged conflicts that resulted in significant human, political and economic costs (New York Times, 2011). These experiences demonstrate that territorial separation does not necessarily resolve the underlying grievances that produce separatist movements. For Nigeria, the key lesson is therefore the need to address grievances relating to political inclusion, representation, inequality, development

and identity through dialogue, constitutional reform, decentralisation and accountable governance as a means of strengthening national cohesion.

## **WHY A NIGERIAN COLLAPSE WOULD NOT REMAIN A NIGERIAN PROBLEM**

Nigeria's significance becomes clearer when it is understood as part of a wider regional system rather than as an isolated state. Like a dam within a river system, a country's instability can affect the areas around it even before complete structural collapse occurs. A severe deterioration in Nigerian state capacity could therefore generate consequences beyond its borders, particularly given the country's demographic, economic and geopolitical weight.

One potential consequence is population displacement. A major deterioration in Nigeria's security environment could push people towards neighbouring countries, placing additional pressure on already vulnerable border communities and public services. Countries such as Ghana, Benin, Togo, Niger and Cameroon have longstanding social, economic and migration connections with Nigeria, making them particularly exposed to major changes in the country's internal stability.

A second concern is the expansion of transnational criminal and militant networks. Nigeria's northern borders connect directly to the wider Sahelian security environment, where armed groups and criminal networks increasingly operate across national boundaries. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data has documented the interaction and expansion of armed groups across the Nigeria–Niger border and the wider Sahel. A significant weakening of Nigerian state capacity could therefore create additional opportunities for such networks to exploit territorial and institutional gaps.

Third, Nigeria's economic difficulties could generate regional economic spillovers. Thus, Nigeria's economic trajectory does not remain entirely domestic; its expansion can create opportunities for regional economies, while prolonged economic disruption can transmit difficulties through established trade relationships. A severely weakened Nigeria would create an institutional challenge for ECOWAS. West Africa is already experiencing political and security pressures, including military takeovers, jihadist violence, economic difficulties and the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS. Given Nigeria's historical role in regional diplomacy and peace and security, a state increasingly consumed by domestic instability would have reduced capacity to contribute to regional crisis management.

These concerns are particularly important as Nigeria approaches the 2027 general elections, with the presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled for January 2027. The elections themselves are an essential democratic process, but the combination of economic hardship, insecurity, political grievances and misinformation requires

vigilance. The circulation of false electoral information in the lead-up to the elections illustrates the potential for misinformation to undermine public confidence and deepen existing social divisions. Ensuring access to credible electoral information and maintaining confidence in democratic institutions will therefore be important for Nigeria's stability

## **CONCLUSION**

Nigeria's problems are not only about Nigeria. Its enormous population, economic weight, natural resources and regional influence mean that prolonged instability within the country could reverberate across West Africa and the wider African continent. Nigeria does not need to collapse completely for its weakening to create regional consequences; sustained insecurity, economic exclusion, political fragmentation and declining public confidence can themselves weaken the foundations of regional stability. A strong Nigeria can strengthen Africa, but a deeply weakened Nigeria can expose the region to instability that no neighbouring country can easily contain. Nigeria's stability should therefore be treated as both a national responsibility and a shared African interest. To achieve this, there is the need to:

**Strengthen security:** Improve intelligence sharing, policing, border security and the justice system alongside military responses to insecurity.

**Promote inclusive economic reforms:** Link economic reforms to jobs, food security, affordable services and improved living conditions.

**Empower the youth:** Invest in skills, employment, entrepreneurship and meaningful youth participation, turning population growth into an economic asset.

**Address separatist grievances:** Promote political inclusion, equitable development, decentralisation and dialogue on identity and marginalisation.

**Protect electoral integrity:** Strengthen access to verified information and counter disinformation ahead of the 2027 elections.

**Deepen regional cooperation:** ECOWAS, the AU and neighbouring states should cooperate on security, migration, borders, trade and conflict prevention.

**Prioritise prevention:** Regional governments should support Nigeria's institutional and socioeconomic resilience before crises escalate.

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