Decentralized Policing in Fragile Federations: A Theoretical Approach to Institutional Design and Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

Fragile federations often suffer from tensions between centralized, coercive authority and the need for decentralized, responsive security governance at the local level. Using the current debate on state policing in Nigeria as an important case, this article develops a theoretical framework for understanding under which decentralized policing can work effectively in divided federal systems. Drawing on Federalism Theory, the Political Economy of Security, and Structuration Theory, the division and management of coercive power among the different levels of government is examined as a function of constitutional design, fiscal arrangements, and institutional norms. While decentralization can potentially increase responsiveness to local crime and accountability, decentralization is only effective with strong oversight, equitable distribution of resources, and professional institutions of policing. Comparative lessons drawn from the experiences in the United States, Canada, Germany, and India bring out some institutional mechanisms of relevance to Nigeria, such as subnational autonomy under federal supervision, the standardization of training, and intergovernmental coordination. The article suggests a new model of Contextual Pluralist Security Governance that involves phased constitutional reform, fiscal equalization, independent state police commissions, and national doctrine coordination to achieve more robust security governance in order to control the dangers of politicization and elite capture.

Keywords: Decentralized Policing, Fragile Federations, Institutional Design, Security Governance, State Police

Introduction

Historical, political, and socio-economic contexts vary across the world in policing systems. Decentralized policing is a policing model that integrates federal, state/provincial, and local police agencies to enhance responsiveness, accountability, and community engagement, as seen in many advanced democracies, such as the United States, Germany, and Canada (Levy, 2013; Ceccato, 2016; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020). There is evidence that decentralisation improves decision-making, crime prevention, intergovernmental coordination, and public trust (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020; Ogunyemi & Aborisade, 2026). It can also, however, foster elite capture, political manipulation, and resource inequalities (Levy, 2013; Mouhanna, 2020).

Policing in Africa is still influenced by colonial centralization, but some reforms in South Africa and Kenya have attempted to increase local accountability and responsiveness (Ogunyemi & Aborisade, 2026; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018). There is comparative evidence that decentralisation can enhance participation, efficiency, and service delivery, provided that it is accompanied by good institutions and fair resource distribution (Lucey, 2018; Animashaun, 2024).

In this context, a fragile federation is defined as a federal system with weak and/or unequal institutional capacity around areas of institutional accountability and the distribution of resources, political stability, and intergovernmental coordination, which limit effective governance at all levels of government. Thus, fragility is regarded as a rather than just a form of conflict; it is a multidimensional governance state of things (Grävingholt et al., 2019; OECD, 2022). This conceptualisation is applicable to Nigeria over time and across the federation where there are disparities between the states' security

governance which is centralised in Urban areas and less efficient in Rural areas (Levy, 2017; Muhammad, 2025; Aborisade & Ogunyemi, 2025).

Although Nigeria is a federal state, the Nigeria Police Force is very centralised, with the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) at the helm (Levy, 2017; Muhammad, 2025). This disconnects between political federalism and centralised policing leads to slow response, low accountability, and inadequate adaptation to the various security challenges such as banditry, oil theft, kidnapping, and urban crime (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2010; Dinnen et al., 2009; Ceccato, 2016; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020; Adegoke, 2014; Ibrahim, 2020; Ugwuanyi, 2023). The increasing demand for state policing is a result of dissatisfaction with the current policing system (Adekunle, 2022; Muhammad, 2025).

Decentralization has the potential to enhance local responsiveness and community participation (Lucey, 2018; Aman, 2020), but there are also concerns about its potential for politicization, elite capture, and unequal state capacities (Mouhanna, 2020; Yahaya, 2020). There is little empirical literature on its feasibility in Nigeria's political economy (Finebone, 2024; Animashaun, 2024). This study aims to fill this gap by applying Federalism Theory, the Political Economy of Security and Structuration Theory to analyse state policing and to formulate policy recommendations that are sensitive to context (Buzan et al., 1998; Duffield, 2001; Nte & Nte, 2025; Muhammad, 2025).

Methodology

Research Approach

This research follows a qualitative and theoretical conceptual approach as it really examines the decentralized policing in Nigeria. Rather than gathering primary information, it manufactures a policy-relevant framework by taking into account the synthesis of current literature, comparative institutional analysis, and theoretical understanding. This approach is appropriate to complex federal situations, in which feasible reform necessitates a serious conceptual underpinning that is anchored in empirical observations and theoretical reflections. The resulting model is intended to inform model policy makers and serve as a foundation for further research.

Analytical Framework

The research is based on three complementary theories. Federalism Theory that establishes the constitutional & normative structure for subnational policing, defining both the division of power & accountability structure. Political Economy of Security points to fiscal arrangements, elite incentives, and relations of power revolving around policing outcomes. Structuration Theory focuses on reproducing patterns of efficiency or dysfunction in terms of organizational norms and routines over time. Hence, theory synthesis provides institutional design, political dynamics, and operational feasibility.

Literature Selection and Synthesis

A theory-building conceptual approach was taken which followed a structured narrative review and comparative institutional analysis. Structured literature search was carried out on Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, and a selection of peer-reviewed articles, policy documents and the foundational literature were subsequently obtained. Searches were planned around a theme of state and decentralised policing, accountability, issues of security governance and intergovernmental relations, and institutional performance. A thematic synthesis of selected literature from the U.S., Canada, Germany and India was used to explore the subject of policing authority, operational autonomy, fiscal relations, accountability, institutional co-ordination and intergovernmental co-operation. Analytical reflection was used to transcend Nigeria's constitutional, political, institutional and security realities and not replicative. This process leads to a Contextual Pluralist Security Governance Model stressing on the multi-phase decentralisation, fiscal equalisation, professional standards, coordination, accountability, efficient, effective and nation-building dimensions.

Scope and Contribution

As a conceptual study, the model is designed to generate debate on institutional reform as well as

to offer the framework for future empirical evaluation. It offers a context-specific, phased pragmatic programme of state policing reform, based on comparative evidence and Nigerian institutional realities.

Theoretical Orientation

This study adopts a multitheoretical approach towards the study of decentralised police as a result of the complexity of the topic under study, mixing Federalism Theory, Political Economy of police and Structuration Theory. These perspectives provide a complex perspective to understanding the constitutional, political, and institutional factors affecting policing outcomes.

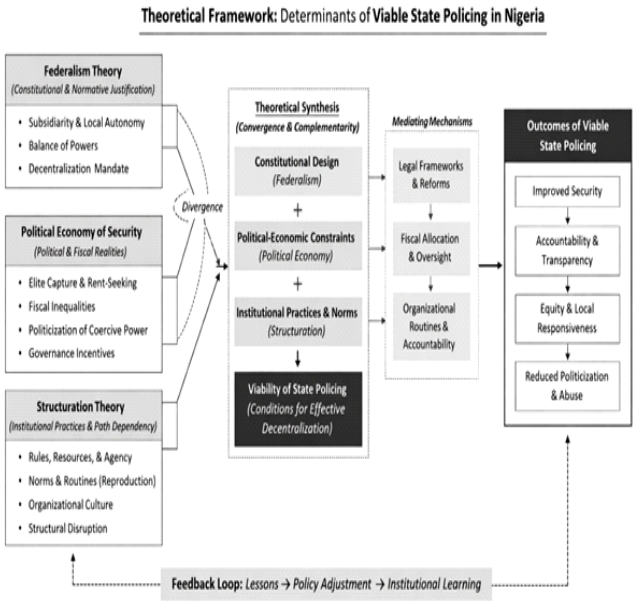
In the field of constitutional provisions, federalism theory lays the groundwork for state policing by conceiving the notions of subsidiary, shared powers, and state autonomy in a federal system (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011). It makes the argument that local governments are more likely to be able to address the different types of security problems that they face, such as banditry in the Northwest, oil theft in the Niger Delta, and urban crime in Lagos (Finebone, 2024). While decentralisation can enhance accountability, responsiveness, and locally-responsive policing, effective intergovernmental coordination and constitutional responsibilities are necessary to ensure that it does not result in fragmentation and the exercise of limited, elite-controlled policing (Nwoba, 2022; Muhammad, 2025).

The Political Economy of Security approach adds to this by looking at the effect of political incentives, the fiscal realities of inequality, the capture effect of elites, rent-seeking and the politicisation of coercive power on policing outcomes (Muhammad, 2025; Nwoba, 2022). It says that mere changes to the constitution are not enough to ensure good policing. Without timely governance incentives and disparities in resources, decentralization might create inefficiency, selective enforcement, and patronage. (Finebone, 2024; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018).

Structuration Theory is a theory that connects with these two by shifting the focus from rules and resources to institutional agency, defined as the capacity to act, through the interaction of the three (Giddens, 1984; Mouhanna, 2020). Developing law is a first step towards effective decentralisation, but significant changes in the behaviour of institutional actors, accountability arrangements and norms are also necessary. It also draws attention to the issue of path dependency, namely that of entrenched institutional routines and patronage networks which, despite the formal decentralisation, may have ill effects on the reform (Finebone, 2024; Levy, 2013; Mouhanna, 2018; Nwoba, 2022).

Hence, these theories imply a need for constitutional renewal to make state policing effective, reconfiguration of the fiscal system to ensure fair treatment for everyone, and institutional change to engender a different kind of institution. The synthesis is grounded in the study's Contextual Pluralist Security Governance Model, which promotes 'phased decentralisation', 'equity in resource distribution', and the 'structural and institutional transformation' to facilitate accountable, effective, and 'contextual' policing in Nigeria (Levy, 2020; Odedina, 2020; Muhammad, 2025).

Theoretical Model



Nigeria's Paradox of Centralized Policing and Governance

Although Nigeria is a federally structured country, the policing system is highly centralized, and the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) exercises the highest level of

control over policing activities in the states, with little or no control over the states (Mouhanna 2020; Levy 2013; Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended; Muhammad, 2025). This has been attributed to delayed response, poor accountability, operational inefficiencies, inadequate response to banditry, kidnapping, oil theft, militancy and urban crime, underfunding, poor welfare, inadequate training, corruption, overlapping mandates between security agencies and others (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018; Ibrahim, 2020; Finebone, 2024). Decentralized policing is possible to enhance community engagement and responsiveness, provided that it is governed well and has adequate resources (Lucey, 2018; Ceccato, 2016; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020); however, critics have noted potential issues of elite capture, politicization, and resource disparities (Mouhanna, 2020; Muhammad, 2025). Although there has been a lot of debate about the Nigerian Constitution, empirical evidence of the operational feasibility of state policing in Nigeria is still limited (Eme & Anyadike, 2012; Onwudiwe, 2024).

Institutional Dysfunction and Danger of Centralization

Nigeria's police force is characterized by its high level of centralization, which has been linked to issues of underfunding, inadequate training, poor welfare, politicization, and institutional weaknesses (Finebone, 2024; Nwoba, 2022). These challenges are linked to structural and political aspects of centralized governance, and are not necessarily due to individual failures (Muhammad, 2025; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018). The lack of autonomy in manpower, budget, and equipment in the local commands often makes it difficult for them to effectively respond to region-specific threats, including banditry, oil theft, and kidnapping (Ibrahim, 2021).

Centralized policing is a challenge to the federal nature of Nigeria, as it reduces the accountability of the states and their operational responsiveness, thereby disconnecting them from the local security needs and decisions taken by the Federal government in Abuja (Mouhanna, 2018; Levy, 2015; Ceccato, 2016; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2018). On the other hand, decentralized systems in Germany, Canada, and the United States are based on local supervision and the autonomy of resources, which is likely to enhance effectiveness (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020).

The inefficiencies are said to stem from elite capture, administration of patronage, and resource distribution inequity by Political Economy Theory (PET); and from entrenched organizational norms, like politicized promotions and less-than-adequate training, by Structuration Theory (ST) (Mouhanna, 2020; Levy, 2013; Dinnen & Braithwaite, 2009; Muhammad, 2025; Lucey, 2018). Overall, the evidence suggests that structural decentralisation is not enough to achieve effective policing reform; it must also be accompanied by political, institutional and cultural change (De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018).

Comparative Institutional Configurations: Lessons for Adaptation rather than Imitation

The comparative policing models show that effective decentralization requires the tailoring of institutional protections to local context and conditions, rather than adopting foreign models (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011, 2012; Ceccato, 2016, 2018). Decentralized policing can enhance the local responsiveness, accountability, and national coordination of policing, provided that there are clear constitutional and institutional arrangements in place, as demonstrated in the United States, Canada, India, and Germany. Layered policing, fiscal autonomy, civilian oversight, judicial review, and interagency coordination provide greater accountability and flexibility of operations in the United States (De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020; Lucey, 2018; Aman, 2020). Cooperative federalism, contractual policing, and comprehensive civilian oversight (Levy, 2017; Dinnen & Braithwaite, 2009) are important attributes of Canada's multilevel policing system. The Indian model demonstrates the potential for the state to have operational autonomy and for the federal government to have a role in national security and intelligence (Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018; Muhammad,

2025), while the German model shows the need for a clear division of jurisdictions and federal oversight to minimise duplication and enhance accountability (Levy, 2015; Finebone, 2024). From these experiences, it is suggested that state policing should be autonomous while being coordinated at the federal level, have equitable fiscal decentralization, have independent civilian oversight, have standardized recruitment and training processes, and have well defined jurisdictions for states. The safeguards would enhance the fight against banditry, kidnapping and oil theft, while reducing the risks of elite capture, political interference and interagency conflict, which would ensure professional, accountable and context-sensitive policing (Ibrahim, 2020; Mouhanna, 2018; Nwoba, 2022; Muhammad, 2025).

Comparative Analytical Matrix: Structural Variables and Adaptable Safeguards for Nigeria

	United States	Canada	India	Germany	Adaptable Safeguards for Nigeria
	Local and state police recruit independently; federal agencies recruit separately (Ceccato, 2016; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020)	Provinces can recruit local officers; federal RCMP handles federal-level hiring (De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020; Lucey, 2018)	States manage recruitment; federal paramilitary support is selective (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011)	Länder recruit independently; federal police recruit for border and national security (Levy, 2013; Ceccato, 2016)	Allow states to recruit officers to address local context, with federal certification for minimum competency to prevent politicized appointments (Muhammad, 2025; Nwogwugwu, & Odedina, 2018)
	States and localities control budgets; federal grants supplement resources (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2009; Ceccato, 2016)	Provincial or municipal budgets; the RCMP is funded federally, but with contract arrangements (De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020)	State budgets largely control policing funds; federal support is limited (Ceccato, 2016)	Länder have independent budgets; federal funds are allocated for national tasks (Levy, 2013)	Provide states with budgetary autonomy for policing; institute fiscal equalization to ensure equity across states (Finebone, 2024; Dinnen & Braithwaite, 2009)
	Civilian review boards, judicial enforcement, internal affairs (Lucey, 2018)	Strong civilian oversight and public accountability mechanisms (De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2018)	Limited independent oversight; internal review exists (Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011)	Independent state-level oversight, combined with federal accountability mechanisms (Levy, 2013)	Establish robust, independent civilian oversight bodies in each state; integrate judicial enforcement and reporting mandates to curb elite capture (Muhammad,

Source: Ogunyemi (2026)

Packing a Punch - Risks and Structural Dangers of State Policing

State policing is proposed to address the shortcomings of Nigeria's centralized policing system and rising insecurity (Adegoke, 2014; Ugwuanyi, 2023). However, decentralization risks elite capture, politicization, ethnic profiling, institutional fragmentation, and inconsistent law enforcement without strong safeguards (Agwanwo, 2014; Finebone, 2024; Awotayo & Omitola, 2024). Historical experiences, including the Native Authority Police, demonstrate the dangers of localized abuse (Dinnen et al., 2009; Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011). Effective state policing therefore requires constitutional safeguards, standardized recruitment and training, civilian oversight, clear jurisdictional boundaries, conditional funding, and performance-based accountability to ensure professionalism, legitimacy, and public trust (Aina, 2024; Lowatcharin, 2016; Muhammad, 2025).

Toward the Pluralist Security Governance Model: A Contextual Pluralist Approach

The originality of this study lies in its Contextual Pluralist Security Governance Model, which addresses the failures of centralized policing while mitigating the historical risks of decentralized policing in Nigeria (Adegoke, 2014; Dinnen et al., 2009; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018; Ugwuanyi, 2023). Integrating Political Economy and Structuration theories, the model explains how weak oversight reproduces abuse and emphasizes constitutional safeguards, professional standards, and citizen oversight to prevent elite capture (Giddens, 1984; Ceccato, 2016; Aina, 2024). Drawing lessons from the Native Authority Police and comparative federal systems, it advocates phased decentralization through pilot projects, fiscal equalization, federal minimum standards for recruitment, training, ethics, and use of force, conditional funding, and inter-state intelligence coordination (Finebone, 2024; Levy, 2013; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020). Independent State Police Commissions and constitutional role clarification would strengthen accountability, reduce political interference, and promote locally responsive yet nationally coordinated policing, enhancing public trust and institutional

effectiveness (Muhammad, 2025; Abacha, 2023; Ceccato, 2016).

Conclusion

Nigeria's centralized policing system reflects the paradox of a federal state with decentralized political authority but centralized security governance, contributing to elite capture, politicized enforcement, weak accountability, and limited responsiveness to local security challenges (Dinnen et al., 2009; Buonanno & Mastrobuoni, 2011; Nwogwugwu & Odedina, 2018; Ugwuanyi, 2023; Finebone, 2024). Guided by Federalism, Political Economy, and Structuration theories, this study shows that sustainable policing reform requires addressing constitutional, political, fiscal, and institutional factors that perpetuate inefficiency and corruption (Ceccato, 2016; Ibrahim, 2020). Accordingly, it proposes a Contextual Pluralist Security Governance Model that combines phased decentralization, fiscal equalization, independent State Police Commissions, federal minimum standards, standardized training, inter-state coordination, and constitutional safeguards to balance local autonomy with national cohesion while reducing elite capture and operational inefficiency (Muhammad, 2025; De Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2020).

The study recommends gradual implementation of state policing within a coordinated federal framework, supported by equitable resource allocation, independent civilian oversight, standardized recruitment and training, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and clear jurisdictional boundaries (Levy, 2013; Awotayo & Omitola, 2024; Pereira et al., 2024). Performance-based accountability and continuous institutional evaluation should guide implementation to strengthen professionalism, public trust, and operational effectiveness. This context-sensitive framework provides practical lessons for Nigeria and other fragile federations seeking accountable, equitable, and responsive policing (Finebone, 2024; Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2018; Ceccato, 2016).

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