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# **Fake Civil Society: The Rise of Pro-Government NGOs in Nigeria**

Matthew T. Page

*Correction: The original version of this paper included an appendix listing some Nigerian organizations. In response to some comments and questions, that appendix has been deleted pending additional review. The appendix erroneously included the Nigeria Network of NGOs based on incorrect information. Carnegie regrets any misunderstandings that may have arisen from this mistaken inclusion.*

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## Summary

Nigeria's dynamic and expansive civil society is one of its greatest strengths and is crucial to maintaining what democratic space still exists in the country. Yet its independence, outspokenness, and unwavering commitment to democracy, transparency, and human rights have long antagonized the kleptocratic, power-hungry—but also image-conscious—ruling elites. To help protect themselves from domestic pressure and outside scrutiny, Nigeria's top power-brokers have cultivated a new generation of pro-government non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Like the fake grassroots groups bankrolled by past military juntas, these surrogate organizations masquerade as authentic civil society groups, singing the praises of top officials and attacking their critics.

A symptom of the country's more fundamental political ills, Nigerian elites' growing use of civil society surrogates should set off alarm bells both domestically and internationally. It is both corrupting *and* corruptive, compounding the country's downward democratic trajectory. Like many countries in Africa—and, for that matter, elsewhere in the world—Nigeria has recently experienced democratic backsliding that threatens its long-term stability and prosperity. The rise of pro-government NGOs is both a cause and a consequence of this backsliding and must be addressed as part of any effort to arrest and reverse it.

### Key Takeaways

- Nigeria's pro-government NGO sector is thriving. Once a niche side hustle for those seeking to curry favor with the regime, running a pro-government NGO has become an increasingly lucrative means of gaining political and media influence. For some, it could be a springboard to high public office.

- Out of 360 pro-government Nigerian NGOs identified by this research, 90 percent have started operating since President Muhammadu Buhari took office in 2015. This correlation suggests that these groups receive high-level support and encouragement. Many are controlled by a small number of individuals who have personal and ethnic connections to Nigeria's ruling All Progressives Congress (APC).
- In addition to praising government and military leaders, Nigeria's pro-government NGOs often attack legitimate civil society groups and even incite violence against them. Pro-government NGOs typically champion illiberal causes, defending the Nigerian government from domestic and international criticism and allegations of corruption, underperformance, and human rights abuses.
- Nigeria's pro-government NGOs are all opaquely funded, likely through off-budget payments or contracts for consulting services. Political appointees known as special assistants will mobilize surrogates on behalf of their principal, usually a minister or agency head. Top military officers' aides play a similar role. Pro-government NGOs appear to operate sporadically, usually at the behest of their funders.
- Almost all of Nigeria's pro-government NGOs exist in name only. Fewer than 7 percent are listed on the country's corporate registry as is legally required. Many operate for only a short time before disappearing; 80 percent of groups examined for this paper held just one or two press conferences in total.
- Many pro-government NGOs thrive on the coverage they receive from a few little-known media platforms, some of which are run by their leaders or their allies. Mimicking legitimate civil society groups, pro-government NGOs often cite the work of supposed think tanks that validate their pro-government or illiberal views.

## **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

- Pro-government NGOs' rhetoric emboldens political and military leaders who behave counterproductively, undermining domestic and international efforts to encourage the Buhari administration to govern more effectively and humanely. Instead, these surrogates attack legitimate NGOs and defend Nigeria's most abusive and corrupt officials. In doing so, they partially negate international democracy and governance assistance as well as the achievements of genuine civil society groups.
- Increased government regulation of Nigeria's civil society sector is not the solution to the problematic rise of pro-government NGOs. Partisan regulators almost certainly would abuse any new rules, allowing pro-government groups to flourish at the expense of legitimate domestic civil society groups and international NGOs. Instead of creating new rules, the Nigerian government should better enforce existing laws.



Nigeria's tax and anti-corruption agencies could start by investigating pro-government NGOs, almost none of which are legally registered or properly administered.

- Nigeria's mainstream media outlets should conduct more due diligence when covering previously unknown civil society groups and refuse inducements to attend their events or place stories about them. The country's many legitimate civil society organizations, meanwhile, could develop a set of voluntary standards that would distinguish them from the disreputable pro-government NGOs.
- Donors, diplomats, and development professionals, as well as legitimate domestic and international NGOs, should do more to call out pro-government groups' toxic behaviors and press their high-level backers to stop sponsoring them. International diplomats should also levy visa bans on pro-government NGO leaders who issue violent threats or spew hate speech.



## Introduction

Broadly defined, Nigeria's civil society landscape is one of the most expansive in the world, encompassing religious bodies, ethnic and subethnic associations, village cooperatives, occupation-based groups, student and alumni entities, charities and foundations, as well as a broad range of advocacy and development-focused NGOs, both international and domestic.<sup>1</sup> Even during long periods of military rule, the country's NGO sector remained surprisingly resilient and independent of government control. Since the end of military rule in 1999, it has grown into what is now the strongest part of the country's shaky democratic life.

Yet Nigeria's civic space has shrunk in recent years as its government has become increasingly illiberal, heavy-handed, and self-serving.<sup>2</sup> Its kleptocratic elites have grown less tolerant of civil society voices, especially those pushing for better governance, greater accountability, and respect for human rights. In a bid to shore up their legitimacy, silence their critics, and expand their patronage networks, Nigeria's ruling elites have fueled the rise of pro-government NGOs: sycophantic surrogates masquerading as civil society groups. In doing so, they resemble their uniformed predecessors who, in the 1990s, tried to stymie democratization using pro-government NGOs as a tool.

In recent years, at least 360 different pro-government NGOs have made headlines with their anti-democratic rhetoric and vocal praise for the regime. They constitute a substantial fake civil society operating alongside legitimate civil society. Roughly 90 percent of these groups started operating after President Muhammadu Buhari took office in 2015, suggesting a strong correlation between his ascension to the presidency and their explosive growth.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority are "briefcase" NGOs: unregistered entities that lack any discernible

track record and frequently make only one or two appearances (such as a press conference or a public protest) before evaporating. Moreover, most are controlled by a small number of pro-government NGO “masterminds,” who are linked to each other and to the Buhari regime by overlapping personal networks (see Figure 1).

Although no two pro-government NGOs are the same, many have certain trademark characteristics. First and foremost, they are sycophantic, quick to praise senior government and military officials and to attack their critics. Pro-government NGOs also frequently champion illiberal causes, pushing back against calls for reform, defending state repression, and absolving the government of responsibility for human rights abuses. Yet they also try to appear legitimate by adopting the mannerisms and lexicon of mainstream NGOs. Pro-government NGOs are also, by definition, opaquely funded, most likely by political appointees close to senior officials who seek to generate media attention for their views.

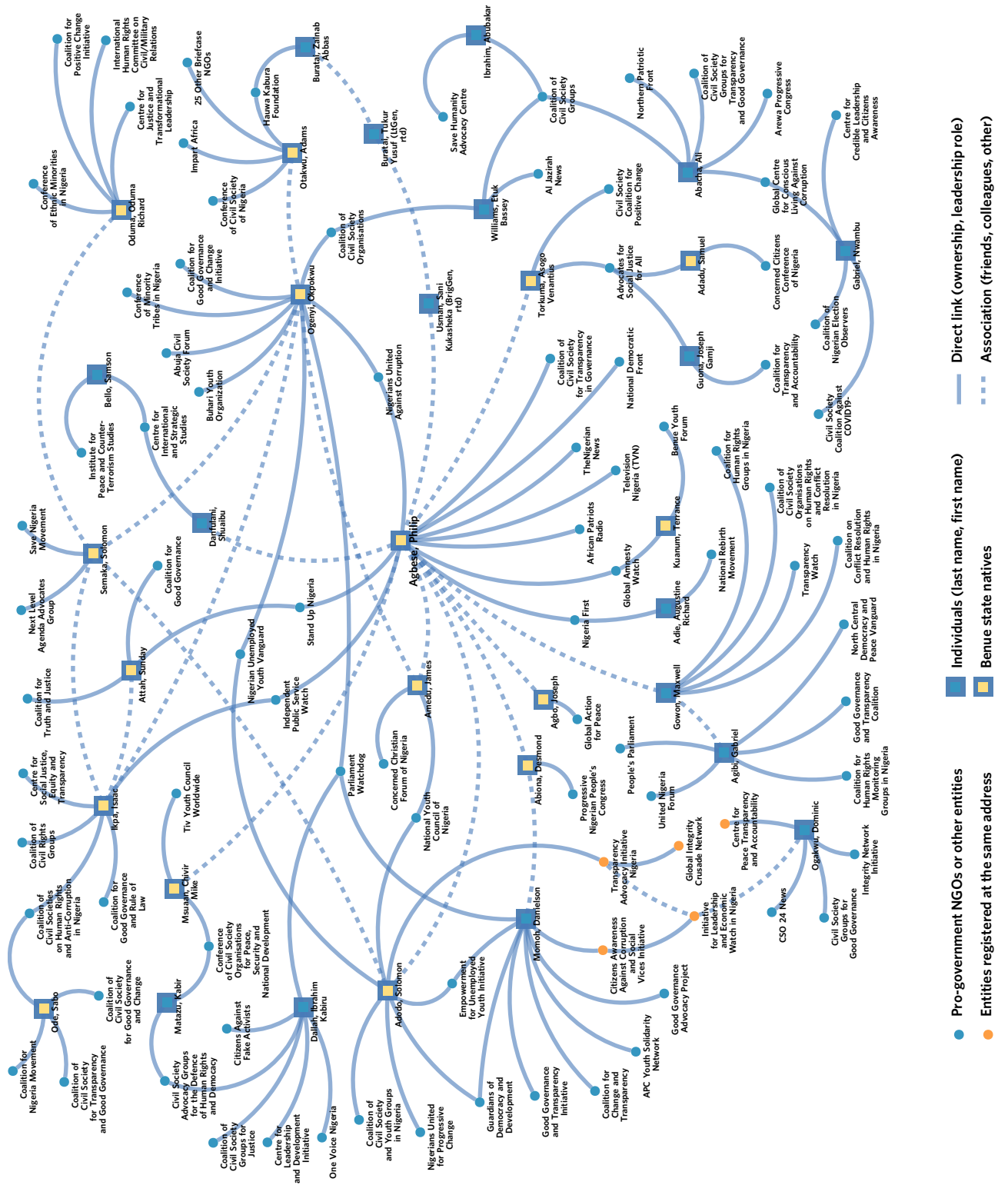
## Comparing Mainstream and Pro-Government NGOs

The terminology this paper uses to describe NGOs is tailored to the Nigerian context and does not necessarily apply to similar groups operating in other countries, many of which are easily recognizable as government-organized NGOs. It is informed by extensive in-country research and two dozen interviews with academic, civil society, government, military, and media sources both in and outside Nigeria. That said, the general issue of fake civil society is relevant to many national contexts, and unfortunately is part of the larger global trend of democratic backsliding. It is hoped, therefore, that this paper may provide insights about the phenomenon in one important country case that will help analysts, activists, aid providers, and policymakers grapple with the problem as it appears elsewhere.

Much of the analysis herein is deliberately normative, separating *mainstream* NGOs (those that seek to advance democratic values and defend human rights) from *pro-government* NGOs (those that, in the context of contemporary Nigerian state behaviors, exist to praise officials and champion illiberal causes). This analysis assumes that the activities of mainstream NGOs are typically constructive and contribute to good governance, sustainable development, and economic prosperity. It also assumes that pro-government NGOs generally behave problematically by parroting official talking points; undermining efforts to hold government accountable; and defending corrupt, insensitive, or abusive acts.

This paper also makes a normative distinction between *briefcase* NGOs (those that exist only on paper) and *legitimate* NGOs (those with a discernible track record and real-world presence). It acknowledges, however, that these distinctions are not always clear. Many pro-government NGOs are briefcase entities, and yet a few are not. Likewise, some mainstream NGOs may operate only intermittently or serve as vehicles for individual activists. Across Nigeria, many one-person or unregistered NGOs do important work, deriving legitimacy from their local impact or niche focus. In other words, little-known or small and personalized NGOs are not, by definition, suspect.

Figure 1. Overlapping Pro-Government NGO Networks



Indeed, many of Nigeria’s civil society startups exist precisely because the barrier for entry is so low. As one observer notes, “most [Nigerian] NGOs are self-starters, and self-appointed advocates of their targets.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike under military rule, today’s newly formed NGOs are relatively free to operate, build relationships, and seek support with international donors. They are also now able to leverage transformative outreach and fundraising tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, however, Nigeria’s civil society sector is equally accessible to those who form pro-government NGOs for political and financial gain. These enduring incentives, along with pro-government NGO industry’s deep historical roots, help explain why it continues to thrive and weigh down Nigeria’s democratic development.

## A Brief History of Nigeria’s Pro-government NGOs

As ubiquitous as pro-government NGOs have become in recent years, they are not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. In the 1990s, under military rule, pro-government NGOs were not merely noisy competitors in civil society spaces, but instead were formidable antagonists able to affect real-world politics. Several such groups—most notably Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA) and the Association for a Better Nigeria (ABN)—played a prominent role in blunting grassroots opposition to authoritarian rule. Suspiciously well-resourced and amplified by state-run media, these entities acted as a counterweight to pro-democracy NGOs like the Civil Liberties Organization, Constitutional Rights Project, and the Transition Monitoring Group, many of whom were sustained by international support.<sup>6</sup> In the words of one scholar, as the Nigerian state became “increasingly resentful” of these NGOs’ efforts, “it tried simultaneously to pacify and co-opt the phalanx of social forces that were ranged against it.”<sup>7</sup>

### Association for a Better Nigeria

The ABN was a civilian organization that advocated for the continued rule of General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria’s head of state from 1985 to 1993. Led by business owner Arthur Nzeribe, the ABN functioned as a proxy for senior officers seeking to forestall Babangida’s promised 1993 transition to civilian governance.<sup>8</sup> Allegedly bankrolled by Nigeria’s security services, the ABN first attempted to derail the transition, obtaining a court injunction to stop the 1993 presidential election.<sup>9</sup> Although the polls proceeded, the ABN sought to discredit them, criticizing the conduct of the electoral commission and obtaining another court ruling to prevent the release of full election results.<sup>10</sup> The ruling provided cover for Babangida to annul the election, a decision that led to the appointment of a weak

interim civilian government that was toppled by defense minister General Sani Abacha shortly thereafter. Five years later, as he defended Abacha's self-succession bid, Nzeribe doubled down on the role he and the ABN played, arguing that "the climate was not ripe for democracy."<sup>11</sup>

The ABN functioned like today's pro-government NGOs in many respects. Opaquely funded and anti-democratic, it acted as a civilian surrogate for Nigeria's authoritarian rulers. As such, it was able to operate one step removed from its uniformed paymasters, lobbying and bribing newly elected legislators, planting stories in newspapers, and co-opting civil society activists.<sup>12</sup> Along with other pro-government NGOs like Third Eye and New Breed, Nzeribe and his ABN developed a set of strategies that he and other second-generation groups would reprise and refine during the Abacha period.

## **Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha**

Perhaps Nigeria's best-known pro-government NGO, YEAA flamboyantly championed General Abacha's 1998 self-succession bid. The group's leader, Daniel Kanu, was a Nigerian American fitness enthusiast who parlayed a contract to supply gym equipment to the presidential villa into a more expansive political relationship with Abacha and his inner circle.<sup>13</sup> YEAA quickly became a multimillion-dollar operation, handing out goods branded with Abacha's name—including rice, soap, jewelry, and even televisions—as part of its campaign.<sup>14</sup> Kanu's refrain that "Only Abacha can hold the country together" made him a frequent guest at government functions and gave him privileged access to the villa.<sup>15</sup>

In March 1998, Kanu organized a Two Million Man March to "persuade" Abacha to run for president. Together, Nigeria's thirty-six states collectively spent up to 9 billion naira (\$414 million in 1998) to each send 50,000 attendees to the rally.<sup>16</sup> In addition, YEAA spent more than 800 million naira (\$36 million in 1998) on alterations to the parade ground where it held the march, erecting eleven towers that held twenty-five loudspeakers each and building ten stages on which popular musicians like King Sunny Ade performed.<sup>17</sup> Kanu claimed that unnamed "organizations, groups, and individuals" had helped finance the rally, though he also admitted that the government paid for at least half of the cost.<sup>18</sup> He later contradicted himself by claiming during a CNN interview that he received "zero . . . absolutely nil" for promoting Abacha's candidacy.<sup>19</sup> The rally culminated in an early morning speech by Abacha's civilian political adviser, who told the crowd that "this spontaneous and sincere outburst of affection solidarity and support is, no doubt, indicative of appreciation of General Abacha's achievements."<sup>20</sup>

## **Other Pro-Abacha NGOs**

YEAA was not the only pro-Abacha NGO-like entity. In the run-up to Abacha's 1998 self-succession bid, more than 150 other such groups sprang up all across Nigeria, including

the National Mass Movement of Nigeria, 21st Generation, Vision '98, the National Movement for Peace and Stability, and the Northern Elders Forum.<sup>21</sup> Similar to YEAA, none registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission as required by law.<sup>22</sup> Some sought to improve Abacha's image and delegitimize pro-democracy activists, while others undertook barely disguised electoral campaigning or attempted to penetrate the civil society movement in order to undermine its organizing capacity.<sup>23</sup> According to one journalist writing in February 1998:

All the groups have now converged on Abuja with lorry loads of hired crowds. They get permits to hold rallies anywhere in the country and are adequately protected by law enforcement agents. They organise symposia and workshops on why Abacha should continue in office and pay visits to state military administrators, ministers, traditional rulers and those that matter in government. Such visits are given prominence in state-owned media. . . . Last week, eight such associations had emerged with some form of presence in Abuja.<sup>24</sup>

Pro-Abacha groups also attacked potential dissenters. In May 1998, one such group, the Northern Nigerian Youth Christian Association, slammed former civilian vice president Alex Ekwueme and other former politicians who opposed Abacha. According to the association, the opposition criticized Abacha because his candidacy “frustrated their personal ambitions to rule Nigeria.”<sup>25</sup> Another pro-Abacha group—Project New Nigeria—piled on, dismissing Ekwueme, author Wole Soyinka, and other pro-democracy figures as “dollar and sterling critics who did nothing for their fatherland.”<sup>26</sup> With Abacha's carefully orchestrated self-succession all but inevitable, Nigeria's vociferous pro-government NGOs were riding higher than ever before. Then Abacha died suddenly in June 1998.

## Return to Civilian Rule

With Abacha gone, Nigeria's pro-government NGOs lost both their reason for existing and their source of financing. Most groups evaporated overnight; others tried to reinvent themselves as the country's political power networks rapidly realigned. Some of their leaders ran for office. The ABN's Nzeribe, for example, joined the People's Democratic Party and served two terms in the Senate.<sup>27</sup> YEAA's Kanu ran unsuccessfully for the House of Representatives, and later served as a special assistant (SA) to a governor of Imo State.<sup>28</sup>

Under presidents Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) and Umaru Yar'Adua (2007–2010), the activities of pro-government NGOs reached a low ebb. In 2010, however, several briefcase NGOs—including Ali Abacha's Northern Patriotic Front and Ikenga Ugochinyere's Alliance for Defense of Democracy—materialized to defend Maurice Iwu, Nigeria's discredited elections chief.<sup>29</sup> A partisan figure who once told U.S. diplomats that “the worst election is better than no election,” Iwu presided over the country's disastrous 2007 general election, which was characterized by political violence, voter intimidation, and evidence of widespread



fraud.<sup>30</sup> Under intense pressure from both domestic civil society groups and Washington, then president Goodluck Jonathan ultimately ignored Iwu's supporters and sacked him ahead of the 2011 vote.<sup>31</sup>

Another factor fueling the creation of briefcase NGOs since 1999 has been the readiness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to accredit little-known groups as official domestic election observers. In-depth analysis of the 120 domestic groups accredited by the INEC to observe the 2019 elections reveals that a minority—only fifty-four—are legitimate NGOs with a discernible public profile, whereas forty-three are briefcase entities, fifteen are pro-government NGOs, and nine are government parastatals or associations of government professionals.<sup>32</sup> This finding suggests that INEC conducts minimal due diligence on entities it accredits—or worse, that it knowingly allows pro-government entities to masquerade as unbiased election observers.

## The Buhari Era

After a fifteen-year lull, pro-government NGO activity has reached new heights since Buhari took office in 2015. Of the more than 360 pro-government NGOs identified in this research, 90 percent began operating in and around the capital, Abuja, since 2015. This surge is unlikely to be coincidental, given that pro-government NGOs rely on senior officials—albeit often indirectly—for guidance and funding. It may also be the result of a deliberate but unspoken strategy on the part of a handful of ruling party and military elites to resuscitate a familiar political tool, used during previous periods of democratic retrenchment to dilute civil society and international criticism.

In addition to tolerating—and perhaps incentivizing—the growth of pro-government NGOs, the Buhari government has tacitly supported legislative efforts to shrink Nigeria's civic space. Since 2015, ruling party legislators have twice introduced bills to strictly regulate NGOs, even though they are already subject to corporate laws such as the Companies and Allied Matters Act.<sup>33</sup> Claiming that some NGOs “solicit funds for selfish motives” and “[fund] the activities of insurgents,” the House deputy majority leader introduced the first such bill in 2016, but it failed to pass before the legislative session ended in 2019.<sup>34</sup>

Reiterating these unfounded assertions, House Speaker Femi Gbajabamila championed a similar bill in 2019, declaring that NGOs needed stricter regulation because some were aiding the Boko Haram insurgency.<sup>35</sup> This second bill aimed to create a civil society regulatory agency with just four civil society representatives on its nineteen-seat board.<sup>36</sup> Two of those four would be nominated by the National Youth Council of Nigeria, an organization whose president, Solomon Adodo, operates several pro-government NGOs.<sup>37</sup> In early 2020, the bill stalled amid sharp criticism from civil society and some legislators, one of whom reminded his colleagues how, under military rule, pro-democracy NGOs gave their “blood, sweat and resources to win democracy for the country.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, legislators amended the Companies and Allied Matters Act in 2020 to increase state influence over civil society

groups, empowering the government to remove trustees from the board of an NGO when, for instance, it deems that doing so is in the “public interests.”<sup>39</sup>

Instead of making it harder for briefcase NGOs to operate, increased government regulation of civil society groups likely would have the opposite effect. Skewed by partisan bias, government NGO regulators almost certainly would focus their attention on monitoring mainstream civil society groups and deregistering those critical of government policy or the security sector. The Buhari government’s failure to enforce existing corporate rules that would preclude briefcase NGOs from operating as prolifically as they do now suggests that new regulations would be implemented in an equally selective manner. Indeed, the creation of a civil society regulatory agency could be the culmination of pro-government NGOs’ long-running efforts to silence pro-democracy, good governance, and human rights groups.

## Pro-Government NGOs: A Recognition Guide

What distinguishes Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs from its many legitimate non-governmental and civil society organizations? Certain key characteristics and behaviors are specific to pro-government NGOs, and can be used to identify them. These traits include sycophancy, a readiness to use ad hominem attacks, illiberalism, a penchant for holding identically staged press conferences, ephemerality, legitimacy-seeking, opaque funding, overt partisanship, and ties to little-known news platforms and think tanks. The majority of pro-government NGOs active since 2015 also share another surprising characteristic: links to the southern part of Benue State, in central Nigeria.

This collection of common identifiers does not mean, however, that all pro-government NGOs look and act the same. Some specialize in defending the government’s track record on particular issues (for example, human rights or corruption), while others’ activities are more opportunistic and disjointed. Some seem more attuned to the news cycle than others, swiftly leaping to the defense of scandal-hit officials or government entities. It is unclear whether this responsiveness stems from their existing ties to those officials or is part of an attempt to cultivate high-level demand for their services by demonstrating a capacity to draw attention.

### Sycophancy

Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs are not subtle: their effusive, over-the-top praise of senior government officials and the military sets them apart from mainstream civil society groups. Although legitimate NGOs sometimes commend the Nigerian government for taking

constructive policy decisions, appointing respected technocrats, or passing legislation that aligns with their values, they generally strive to ensure such feedback is substantive and nonpartisan. Pro-government NGOs, in contrast, signal their loyalty and support for the government, ruling party, and military as loudly and frequently as possible.

Since 2015, pro-government NGOs have showered Buhari, his government, the military, and its service chiefs with adulation. In late 2020, for example, one such group issued a press release to “applaud the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari for the giant strides recorded in the improvement of security in Nigeria” and make the false claim that the military “has been able to restore normalcy in North West” and has incapacitated Boko Haram “in almost all the states in North-East Nigeria.”<sup>40</sup> In early 2020, another briefcase NGO “network” lauded Buhari for his “courageous and fearless posture in speaking the truth no matter the situation. His commitment is unwavering and an indication that, in a matter of time, the menace of Boko Haram would come to an end.”<sup>41</sup> Around the same time, a third pro-government NGO likewise hailed the Nigerian Army’s widely criticized “super camp” strategy—which entailed a withdrawal from a wide network of forward operating bases to a smaller number of highly fortified compounds—as a “magic wand” in the fight against Boko Haram.<sup>42</sup>

Pro-government groups also sometimes couch their effusive praise as “policymaker recommendations,” copying the tone and format of statements made by legitimate NGOs. For example, one group that held a press conference to laud Nigeria’s corruption-prone National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) recommended that “[Buhari] continue in this fashion with regards to the operations of NEMA,” that the agency’s director-general does not “rest on his oars,” and that “[Buhari] commends the director-general . . . for the excellent job he is doing.”<sup>43</sup> In 2018, following a series of military defeats, another pro-government NGO held a press conference to advocate that the Nigerian Army should maintain its “winning spirit” in the fight against Boko Haram, assessing that “the Nigerian military has continued to rout the terrorists albeit with the occasional sacrifice to the fatherland.”<sup>44</sup>

Fake awards are another tool that pro-government NGOs use to ingratiate themselves with prestige-hungry senior officials or, in some cases, help scandal-ridden individuals launder their reputations. In this way, pro-government NGOs emulate opportunistic media organizations, professional groups, and charitable foundations that frequently bestow such spurious awards.<sup>45</sup> By presenting awards, briefcase NGOs demonstrate their utility as surrogates for senior officials, particularly their ability to generate positive press coverage for them. Award-giving also provides new entrants to the briefcase NGO industry with a pretext for meeting and expanding their relationship with senior officials and their SAs.

Examples of this tactic abound. In early 2021, one briefcase NGO presented a government agency head with an award for being “The Most Outstanding and Distinguished Director-General of the Decade in Nigeria.”<sup>46</sup> In 2019, another unknown NGO presented a “Best Governor” award to a state governor who had just weathered a major corruption scandal.<sup>47</sup> In another instance, a pro-government NGO presented a Nigerian Army battalion

commander with a “Peace Award for Excellence and National Unity and Professionalism.”<sup>48</sup> Although these manufactured awards seemingly are harmless, for pro-government NGOs they are part of a broader set of behaviors that help them—and senior officials—appear more legitimate and respectable.

## Ad Hominem Attacks

Even as Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs praise key members of the current regime, they also direct stinging ad hominem attacks on the critics or perceived opponents of Buhari, the military, or senior government officials. This rhetoric has three main aims. First, it is used to discredit and delegitimize outside criticism by painting it as partisan, unpatriotic, or driven by ulterior motives. Second, it is employed to intimidate and silence legitimate activists, credible domestic and international NGOs, foreign governments, and the media. Finally, it helps to shift responsibility for Nigeria’s worsening security situation and other governance failures away from top officials onto malign external influences.

Pro-government NGOs’ attacks, whether independently initiated or guided by top officials, provide a useful window into the zeitgeist of Nigeria’s ruling elites, revealing which critiques they find most unsettling. They tend to target a similar set of perceived adversaries. These include Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch for their work on human rights abuses in Nigeria; Transparency International, especially its annual Corruption Perception Index, in which Nigeria consistently ranks poorly; international media organizations such as CNN, the BBC, and Reuters; and anti-government groups such as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and the Indigenous People of Biafra.



Pro-government NGO protest against Amnesty International.

Source: “Civil Society Group Calls for Expulsion of Amnesty International,” Television Nigerian, YouTube video, 1:19, May 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8DqOnOaMXw>.

In some cases, pro-government NGOs’ attacks verge on incitement, painting respected, reform-minded organizations as enemies of the state. In early 2021, for example, one pro-government NGO accused the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Amnesty International of conspiring to overthrow the Nigerian government, asserting that:

The ICC, Amnesty International and their associates are collaborating with the opposition in this devilish pursuit . . . jostling for an illegal and possibly a forceful regime change to plant elements of the opposition in positions that will enable them to destroy the country from within. . . . It is most unfortunate that the ICC and Amnesty International . . . have now constituted themselves into pro-terrorist organizations simply because of their desperation to implement the evil agenda they have in the country. They have also committed themselves to actively sabotaging Nigeria's hard-won democracy, which qualified them as the country's leading enemies. . . . [We] unequivocally demand that the Federal Government takes decisive actions to counter the threats posed to Nigeria's democracy and security by the ICC and Amnesty International. Things have gotten to the point where these organizations, irrespective of their now abused international status, must treat [*sic*] in the manner they deserve. . . . [We are] warning the ICC and Amnesty International that they must now be prepared to meet the masses of Nigeria, whose lives they are jeopardizing with their subversive activities.<sup>49</sup>

Another pro-government NGO issued a similar threat:

Nigerians must rise up and disown Amnesty International and all it stands for. They must take their future into their hands and send this demonic NGO out of their country in order to have peace. . . . The organization and those who implement its evil plans in Nigeria will now be treated in the same measure they have treated our dear country. They cannot expect to enjoy peace and tranquility where they have sponsored terrorists to flood parts of the country with human blood.<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, the ironically named Citizens Against Fake Activists—a staunchly pro-military NGO—went a step further, calling for the Nigerian government to

prescribe death by hanging for anyone that supports Boko Haram in any way, including those that hide behind the nomenclature of activists to offer assistance to terrorists and those who collude with foreign entities to undermine the national interest of Nigeria. . . . It is our view that if they can be callous to the point of sabotaging Nigeria for foreign interests and help them to empower Boko Haram then they should also be ready to get what is coming to them as repercussions for their treachery.<sup>51</sup>

Over the long term, pro-government NGOs increasing use of hateful rhetoric could radicalize a few unwitting Nigerians, inciting them to conduct politically motivated attacks against domestic civil society groups, international NGOs, and journalists. In this respect, Nigeria's pro-government NGOs and their associated online platforms could become like far-right media outlets in other countries around the world: breeding grounds for intolerance, conspiracy theories, and political violence.

## Illiberalism

As the aforementioned attacks show, pro-government NGOs' tendency to rail against, rather than promote, values championed by their legitimate counterparts is one of their most defining characteristics. Their dissonant stances on core issues held by mainstream civil society groups—human rights, democracy, good governance, and the protection of civil liberties—are significant red flags.

Pro-government NGOs' reactions to the 2020 #EndSARS protests, which decried the brutal, abusive practices of the Nigerian Police's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), illustrate their anti-democratic tendencies. Even as other domestic and international NGOs supported Nigerians' right to peacefully protest against police brutality while also condemning incidences of looting and attacks on security personnel, pro-government NGOs opposed the protests in their entirety. They also criticized international media coverage of the Lekki shootings (in which soldiers killed at least ten unarmed protesters), with one group calling the incident "fake news."<sup>52</sup> Another organization slammed CNN's coverage of the Lekki killings, saying it "resorted to concocting fresh lies with its fantasy movie production" and that its coverage was "patently racist" and "part of a campaign of demonization against the authorities in Nigeria."<sup>53</sup> In one notably ironic instance, a pro-government NGO defended security agencies' handling of the #EndSARS crisis by accusing the international media of pay-for-play journalism:

CNN should wake up from the blind hatchet jobs it is contracted to do. Truth fights back. It goofed in Nigeria terribly and the world is increasingly frowning at their public media mercantilism. It should accept the reality that some disgruntled elements are out to destabilize the country and recruited it to consciously water this agenda to fruition. We know CNN as satanic agents, but Nigeria is a forbidden land to practice their trade. Let them look elsewhere.<sup>54</sup>

For their part, mainstream civil society groups view pro-government NGOs and their illiberal agenda with deep mistrust.<sup>55</sup> Reputable civil society forums such as the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, a decade-old platform for civil society groups to coordinate and collaborate on election issues, does not include any pro-government NGOs.<sup>56</sup> This state of affairs suggests that Nigeria's more credible and well-established NGOs are able to identify and marginalize pro-government NGOs, even if many media platforms are not. Although this "member's club" approach could be seen as exclusionary, it does ensure that pro-government NGOs' illiberal rhetoric does not contaminate legitimate civil society narratives.

## A Penchant for Press Conferences

All NGOs convene public events, such as presentations, workshops, and report launches, from time to time. However, Nigeria's pro-government NGOs specialize in holding



identically staged “global press conferences”. Hosted at the same two or three Abuja hotels and bedecked with the same style of banners, these events serve as a platform for reading—often verbatim—similarly structured press releases that many media outlets then print word-for-word. Since 2015, pro-government groups have convened well over 500 such press conferences, ensuring that their anti-democratic attacks and pro-regime paeans frequently make headlines.<sup>57</sup>

## Ephemerality

Many of Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs exist only in name, popping up for a few weeks before disappearing altogether. Out of the 360-plus pro-government groups identified through this research, more than 290 held just one or two press conferences in total.<sup>58</sup> Fewer than 7 percent are registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission, as all NGOs are legally required to do.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, very few possess any discernible digital footprint (website, Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn profile) or operate from a brick-and-mortar address.

Despite their ephemerality, pro-government NGOs are quick to label those who criticize government policies and actions as “fake activists.” In one such statement, a briefcase group lamented that:

[We are] baffled at the eagerness some Nigerians housed under Nigeria’s reigning modern camps for idlers parading as CSOs [civil society organizations]/activists. They easily render themselves as personality attack dogs and weapons of blackmail for equally dubious characters for peanuts. They flaunt the emblem of disgusting, unscrupulous and unconscionable characters. Outside their overt partisan proclivities is the tendency of unbated exhibition of unrestrained hatred against the anti-corruption campaigns of President Muhammadu Buhari and any of his appointee [*sic*] who toes this path.<sup>60</sup>

Even as this rhetoric seeks to delegitimize those civil society activists who question the conduct of Nigeria’s often venal and increasingly authoritarian ruling class, it draws attention to the fact that most pro-government NGOs are themselves ephemeral constructs.

## Legitimacy-Seeking

Even Nigeria’s shortest-lived pro-government NGOs go to great and often obvious lengths to appear legitimate. Their leaders may give themselves dubious honorifics, such as comrade, high chief, sir, or prince, or misuse real-world professional titles like ambassador or professor. Some groups attempt to bolster their credibility by presenting themselves as the voice of particular professional or social groups, such as lawyers, unemployed youth, or Nigerians living in the diaspora.<sup>61</sup> To convey a corporate identity and make their press conferences more

eye-catching, pro-government NGOs may employ matching, branded, or color-coordinated clothing for public events.

Pro-government NGOs also seek to exaggerate their importance by impersonating genuine stakeholders or portraying themselves as nationwide coalitions of dozens—even hundreds—of unnamed civil society groups. In doing so, they seek to attach more credibility and legitimacy to their statements, implying that they represent the views of a wider social or geographical constituency. Out of the more than 360 pro-government NGOs identified for this paper, 96 had “coalition” in their name.<sup>62</sup> Identifying as a coalition also imitates a strategy used by legitimate civil society groups, who sometimes form temporary coalitions to speak collectively or lobby the government on specific issues, especially during elections.

### **Opaque Funding**

Murky financing is another common feature of Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs. Legitimate NGOs of all sizes need funds to operate, organize events, conduct training and research, pay staff, and rent office space. Most legitimate NGOs are supported either directly by grants or task-specific contracts from international development agencies and charitable foundations, or indirectly via partnerships with larger NGOs.<sup>63</sup> Many disclose their funders on their website, at their events, or in their annual reports. Most international donors likewise publish details of the projects and organizations they fund.

Pro-government NGOs, by contrast, do not reveal their funding sources. Since these groups’ activities run counter to—and often explicitly oppose—the values of international donors and legitimate domestic NGOs, it can be assumed that they do not receive funds from these sources. Instead, they almost certainly are bankrolled by government entities, the military, or ruling party supporters. Although the scope and scale of this funding is a mystery, some of it likely originates from “security votes”—corruption-prone slush funds budgeted for the use of top federal, state, and security officials—or through public relations spending by SAs attached to top officials.<sup>64</sup>

According to sources interviewed for this paper, SAs play a key role in doing business with pro-government NGOs. Most senior officials have several such SAs, all of whom are working-level staffers. Sometimes, briefcase NGO entrepreneurs will approach an SA to market their services.<sup>65</sup> In most instances, however, an SA will seek out briefcase NGO operators, having convinced their principal that they have a public relations problem that can be countered using surrogates.<sup>66</sup> SAs most likely to engage with surrogates include those whose portfolios cover political affairs, media, digital/new media, domestic affairs, public relations, and legal matters.<sup>67</sup>

SAs typically use funds gleaned from their ministry or agency’s operating budget to pay surrogates to generate positive media attention or wage attacks on behalf of their principal.<sup>68</sup> In some cases, they will look for individuals who have a reputation for creating and effectively



mobilizing briefcase pro-government NGOs and negotiate a fee for their services.<sup>69</sup> Thus, in many respects, SAs' use of pro-government NGOs is akin to their use of public relations consultants, sympathetic journalists, or social media warriors to help shape narratives and refute accusations of corruption or underperformance.

The military uses similar methods to engage pro-government NGOs, according to defense sector sources interviewed for this paper. Like SAs, uniformed aides to Nigeria's service chiefs also are unofficially tasked with protecting their principals from bad press.<sup>70</sup> Yet unlike civilian officials, Nigeria's service chiefs have a dedicated official mechanism—their Directorate for Public Relations—responsible for influencing media narratives and pushing back on outside critics, especially international human rights organizations.<sup>71</sup> The military pays for the services of outside surrogates such as briefcase NGOs using both off-budget cash payments and inflated contracts for human rights training, media consulting services, or digital promotion.<sup>72</sup> To gain access to these lucrative opportunities, pro-government NGOs must leverage their personal connections to lobby senior officers and cultivate allies within the chain of command as well as demonstrate their ability to disseminate pro-military propaganda in the press and on social media.<sup>73</sup>

## Overt Partisanship

Outright politicization is another element that distinguishes briefcase NGOs—both pro-government and opposition-backed—from their legitimate counterparts. Before Buhari's election in 2015, Nigeria's briefcase NGOs engaged primarily in a partisan context, attempting to confer legitimacy on candidates via well-publicized endorsements or claiming to vindicate politicians accused of corruption or poor performance. Once Buhari entered office, pro-government groups made efforts to burnish his reputation and secure his hold on power.

Ahead of the 2019 elections, for example, a generically named Coalition of Civil Society Organizations held a press conference to endorse Buhari for a second term, citing his “excellent performance” in securing the country.<sup>74</sup> Claiming to consist of over 300 groups, the coalition was led by Okpokwu Ogenyi, a Benue South native (see below) and aspiring APC politician linked to at least ten other pro-government NGOs.<sup>75</sup> To justify its endorsement, the coalition pointed to a report by a pro-government “think tank” that “yawningly reechoes that the President has frenetically tackled the insurgency with so much vigor, energy and resources. It stamps that [he] has made the difference in counter-terrorism combat and [is] deserving of loud accolades and commendations.”<sup>76</sup> Rather than promoting a free and fair electoral process, the purported coalition focused on championing Buhari's candidacy.

The partisan political activities of briefcase NGOs occasionally are narrow and parochial in scope, aimed at buoying (or torpedoing) the ambitions of individual politicians. In early 2021, for example, the Centre for Credible Leadership and Citizens Awareness—which claims, without evidence, to be a coalition of over 100 civil society groups—held a series of press conferences in support of a senator from Cross River State whose reelection was being

challenged in the courts. Couching its rhetoric in talk of electoral integrity and the rule of law, the self-described civil society network pled the senator's case under the guise of a roundtable discussion on "The Role of INEC and the Judiciary in Our Electoral System."<sup>77</sup> Its leader, an associate of the well-connected NGO figurehead Ali Abacha (see below), argued that the senator is a "vibrant young lawyer and a doctorate degree holder [who] should be let alone to effectively continue the representation of the good people of Cross River North."<sup>78</sup> This type of openly political intervention is characteristic of fake civil society groups.

### **Ties to News Sites and "Think Tanks"**

Pro-government NGOs thrive on the coverage their statements, press conferences, and public protests receive from a dozen or so of Nigeria's newest and least-known media platforms. Some of these platforms are owned or operated by the leaders of pro-government NGOs or their close associates. Etuk Bassey Williams, for example, who leads the Coalition of Civil Society Groups—a prominent pro-military NGO—is the CEO of Al Jazirah News, a platform that affords generous coverage to his and many other pro-government NGOs.<sup>79</sup>

Well-established media outlets also print articles featuring the activities of pro-government NGOs. It is unclear why these platforms' career journalists do not carry out due diligence on unfamiliar NGOs or ask tough questions about their sponsors or biases. In many instances, mainstream media platforms will publish pro-government NGOs' press statements verbatim without placing their remarks in context or seeking opposing viewpoints. Such stories could be the product of brown-envelope journalism, a widespread practice in Nigeria in which reporters accept, or even solicit, cash in exchange for placing stories.<sup>80</sup> In a 2013 study, more than 75 percent of journalists surveyed admitted to accepting such gifts, sometimes euphemistically called "transport money" or "kola nut."<sup>81</sup>

Emulating their legitimate counterparts, pro-government NGOs also draw upon the work of a small number of sympathetic "think tanks" whose research—invariably unpublished—validates their views. One such entity is the Centre for International and Strategic Studies (not to be confused with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a reputable Washington, DC-based think tank). The organization does not appear to have any full-time staff, a physical address, or a website where its analysis and other information about it and its roster of experts can be accessed.<sup>82</sup> In January 2020, it hosted a book launch for Terrance Kuanum, an associate of Philip Agbese (see below) and spokesman for Global Amnesty Watch, a strongly pro-military NGO.<sup>83</sup> Another briefcase think tank, the Centre for Counter-Terrorism and Preventive Diplomacy, is linked to a person named as an attorney for the Save Humanity Advocacy Centre, another prolific pro-military NGO.<sup>84</sup>

## The Benue South Connection

Notably, a majority of pro-government NGOs identified by this paper have ties to the southern part of Benue State in central Nigeria (see Map 1). The reasons behind this geographical linkage are not entirely clear. Benue State is not a stronghold of the ruling APC; in recent years, it has been more of a swing state. Moreover, Benue South has returned only People's Democratic Party senators since 1999. The zone is overwhelmingly Christian and home to the Idoma and Igede ethnic groups, which are overshadowed by the larger Tiv ethnic group in state political calculations. One interviewed source did suggest, however, that Benue's links to pro-government NGOs may stem from the fact that local politics there are sharper-elbowed, more radical, and more zealous than elsewhere in Nigeria.<sup>85</sup>

**Map 1. Benue State**



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The likelier explanation for the Benue South connection has to do with the role of a few key pro-government NGO leaders and their expansive, intertwined personal and kinship networks. Foremost among these is Philip Agbese, a pro-government NGO entrepreneur without equal. Agbese and many of his kinsmen-turned-associates—including Isaac Ikpa, Ogenyi Okpokwu, Solomon Adodo, and Sabo Odeh—operate portfolios of pro-government NGOs that vary in size and activity level. Each appears to have cultivated separate personal networks of fellow NGO entrepreneurs, some of whom also have clear ties to Agbese. Nevertheless, the ongoing proliferation and expansion of Nigeria’s pro-government NGO industry suggests that its ties to Agbese and other pioneers from Benue South may gradually become less salient over time.

## Pro-Government NGO Leaders: A Closer Look

Given the ephemeral nature of many of Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs, it makes sense to look at a few prominent leaders linked to some of the subsector’s most enduring groups. Analyzing their activities and behaviors will help reveal how pro-government NGOs function and how their harmful impact on democracy, governance, and human rights in Nigeria can be addressed.

### Philip Agbese: The Politician

If Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs were a constellation, Philip Agbese would be its North Star. Dynamic, articulate, and well-networked, Agbese is connected either directly or indirectly to more than forty such groups. An ethnic Idoma from southern Benue State, Agbese obtained a law degree from Middlesex University in the United Kingdom.<sup>86</sup> He is also an aspiring APC politician. In 2020, he launched his 2023 campaign for the House of Representatives after abandoning a mooted Senate bid.<sup>87</sup> Agbese is also keen to earn a reputation for philanthropy by donating money to his community and pledging to pay to send three top undergraduates from his prospective constituency to earn master’s degrees in the United Kingdom.<sup>88</sup>

When not campaigning, Agbese writes for various media outlets, including his own online platform *The Nigerian News*. His articles focus on complimenting Buhari and government policies, lauding the military, and needling his own opponents.<sup>89</sup> Agbese even wrote an grandiloquent op-ed to deny “blackmailing diatribes” made by “pseudo-activist[s]” that accused him of being sponsored by President Muhammadu Buhari . . . and the Chief of Army Staff and leader of the counter-insurgency operations in Nigeria, Lt. Gen. Tukur Yusufu Buratai,

my most admirable Nigerian in recent times[,] of being commissioned to spearhead the campaign against the expulsion of Amnesty International (AI) in Nigeria.”<sup>90</sup> He also claimed that he is “not one of those publishers who will send out my reporters or go to solicit for help from anyone because I support the Nigerian Army or President Buhari’s government. I do it very honestly and from the bottom of my heart.”<sup>91</sup>

Looking at his prodigious output, it is clear that Agbese is a wordsmith at heart. In 2019, he published a book, *Integrity vs Power Play: Understanding the Buhari Phenomenon*—which he claimed received over 1 million preorders—profiling Buhari as a “transformational leader and an outstanding democrat.”<sup>92</sup> It was not, he disingenuously claimed, “the usual praise-singing or sycophantic stuff on Buhari’s administration, which is now the creed and penchant of many Nigerians who pencil down anything on public office holders.”<sup>93</sup> Yet his book evidently was written with a ruling party primary run in mind.

Despite Agbese’s assertion, the acknowledgments section of his book reads as a “who’s who” of Nigerian pro-government NGOs. In it, he thanks Okpokwu Ogenyi (“a true brother, friend, and partner”); Terrance Kuanum of Global Amnesty Watch; Isaac Ikpa of the Centre for Social Justice, Equity and Transparency, as well as many other briefcase coalitions; and Shuaibu Danfulani of the Centre for International and Strategic Studies.<sup>94</sup> Agbese also thanked “my silent teacher” the retired Brigadier General Sani Kukasheka Usman, who served as director of the Nigerian Army’s public relations from 2015 to 2018.<sup>95</sup> In a 2019 op-ed, Agbese said of his mentor:

Usman knew, wars are not won with arsenals alone. Propaganda plays an ostensible role. In fact, Nazi Germany wartime propagandist, Joseph Goebbels enunciated a guiding principle of war propaganda. He said, “The best propaganda is that which, as it were, works invisibly, penetrates the whole of life without the public having any knowledge of the propagandistic initiative.” The retired Army image maker embodied this perfection throughout his service years, wherever he served.<sup>96</sup>

Something of a propagandist himself, Agbese’s admiration for others who “work invisibly” is noteworthy. If and when it occurs, Agbese’s ascension to public office will be a boon to Nigeria’s pro-government NGOs, many of which are run by his allies and acolytes.

## **Bosede Ajibola: The Princess**

Princess Bosede Ajibola is perhaps one of the most militant and highly specialized briefcase NGO operators in Nigeria. In less than three years, she has made a name for herself by aggressively defending the conduct of Nigeria’s military, praising its service chiefs, and attacking its perceived domestic and international critics. Nevertheless, Ajibola’s background and personal connections are unclear, as she has no digital footprint beyond her media appearances, protest marches, and the occasional op-ed.

Ajibola first appeared in the public arena in early 2019 when, under the auspices of nine different briefcase NGOs, she made a series of partisan, pro-government media forays.<sup>97</sup> By early 2020, she had established her brand and settled on her primary mouthpiece: the pro-military Centre for African Liberation and Socio-Economic Rights (CALSER). Using CALSER as a platform, she subsequently held near-weekly press conferences praising the army, condemning international NGOs, and attacking the governor of Borno State for daring to criticize the military's conduct in his state.

Ajibola also excels at organizing demonstrations. In December 2019, for example, she used a briefcase group called the Movement Against Slavery and Terrorism to lead street protests against the French government, accusing them of “providing logistic support under the cover of humanitarian ‘whatever’ to the Boko Haram fighters” and blaming them for the “resurgence of Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria.”<sup>98</sup> Departing from her prepared script, she also claimed that: “A cargo plane was intercepted . . . in Mali, and it was all African children. Some of them were Nigerian children. And they were taken there for what? For their pedophile people to destroy the destiny of these children, and then after these children die, they harvest human organs for their own children. No child is better than any other child! We say no to France!”<sup>99</sup> This extreme rhetoric echoes that used by other far-right conspiracy theorists, such as Q-Anon adherents, who frequently accuse their opponents of child trafficking and organ harvesting.<sup>100</sup>

Since adopting CALSER as her primary platform, Ajibola has escalated her rhetoric. In November 2020, for example, she appeared to threaten to harm Amnesty International staffers, saying that her group would carry out protests on the same “scale that innocent police men lynched by mobs were treated during the [#EndSARS] protest across the country.”<sup>101</sup> Likewise, in April 2021, CALSER weaponized the U.S. State Department's 2020 Human Rights Report for Nigeria—which failed to verify the October 2020 killing of unarmed #EndSARS protesters by soldiers at the Lekki tollbooth—against Amnesty International. In the State Department's hedging, CALSER saw an opportunity to discredit civil society critics of the army's poor human rights record. It swiftly convened a press conference to announce that Washington had “vindicated the [Nigerian Army] of any wrongdoing during the protest in Lagos” and hail the report as “a welcome development for all lovers of democracy because it has indeed exposed the conspiracy against the [army] by Amnesty International and its cohorts.”<sup>102</sup> Looking ahead, CALSER—whether fronted by Ajibola or some other firebrand—is on track to become one of the army's most tireless and vociferous surrogates.

### **Ibrahim Kabiru Dallah: The Tailor**

The story of Ibrahim Kabiru Dallah—who runs a clothing shop and digital printing business in Nasarawa State—demonstrates the degree to which Nigeria's pro-government NGOs operators have to hustle and multitask to make ends meet. From his social media accounts, Dallah appears to be industrious, ambitious, and versatile. He aspires, he says, to become

governor of his state someday.<sup>103</sup> Yet he also has an alter ego as the vocal leader of several briefcase pro-government NGOs.<sup>104</sup>

Using these NGOs as a platform, Dallah has aggressively defended the government's poor human rights record and attacked its critics. On October 14, 2020, he led a demonstration by the vaguely named Coalition of Civil Society Groups in Abuja that called on Nigerians to support a new unit formed as the successor to the infamous SARS and end their protests against police brutality.<sup>105</sup> At its demonstration, the coalition declared that the #EndSARS protests were “totally uncalled-for and unacceptable,” not to mention “ill-conceived as the advantages and usefulness of SARS in curbing crimes in Nigeria overwhelmingly outweighed their few mistakes, therefore, such protests can be highly demoralising.”<sup>106</sup> In a stark warning presaging the Lekki killings perpetrated six days later, Dallah himself added that “whoever sees the police as an enemy is a suspect.”<sup>107</sup> Five days after the killings, Dallah appeared unfazed, tweeting: “It is time to get all the enemies of Nigeria arrested. Especially those working with the International Community to undermine our Country.”<sup>108</sup>

In April 2020, Dallah—under the auspices of a group called the Coalition Against Fake Activists—forcefully condemned Buhari's social media critics. Calling them “pay-for-hire activist[s],” he asserted that “their decision to desecrate the highest office in the land is the height of irresponsibility regardless of how much they have been paid to distract the government of the day.”<sup>109</sup> A few days later, Dallah held another press conference to say that Buhari's critics “would be made to pay for their sins and against Nigeria and humanity if they do not desist from such unpatriotic acts.”<sup>110</sup> Just a few days later, he again spoke out to decry “fake activists and fake news agents” who, he claimed, along with “their proxies as well as affiliated international NGOs [are] escalating the campaign of fake news and unsubstantiated stories to help Boko Haram/ISWAP resist its imminent end.”<sup>111</sup> By tirelessly assailing its critics as stooges and enemies of the state, Dallah is helping the government shrink Nigeria's civic space.

Dallah's rise from provincial clothier to national propaganda warrior illustrates how the proliferation of Nigeria's pro-government NGOs is driven in part by hustling opportunists' efforts to meet top officials' growing demand for civil society surrogates. It suggests that, over time, the number of part-time pro-government NGO operators will increase, making it more difficult to identify them and counter their anti-democratic, authoritarian-friendly messaging.

## **Ali Abacha: The Old Hand**

Ali Abacha—the younger brother of former dictator Sani Abacha—is one of Nigeria's most seasoned pro-government NGO leaders. Linked to at least five such groups, one of his most enduring briefcase NGOs is the Northern Patriotic Front (NPF), a group that continues to operate twenty-three years after it first made headlines by advocating in favor of Sani Abacha's self-succession bid.<sup>112</sup> It occasionally grabs headlines by praising senior officials



and government actions. In 2011, for example, Ali Abacha and the NPF fawned over then president Goodluck Jonathan's cabinet picks, singling out the reappointment of petroleum minister Diezani Alison-Madueke for special praise by saying that she "transformed the petroleum industry."<sup>113</sup> Alison-Madueke has since been implicated in multiple corruption scandals, is the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation in the United Kingdom, and is being tried in Nigeria—in absentia—for money laundering.<sup>114</sup>

In early April 2014, Abacha and the NPF issued a similar flattery-laden press release saluting "the federal government ably led by His Excellency, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan for the handling of the Boko-Haram issue" and commend the "doggedness of the Nigerian military and . . . their ability in restoring partial normalcy to the [conflict] zone despite the huge losses suffered."<sup>115</sup> A mere ten days later, Nigerian government and military failures were laid bare when Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students from a school in Chibok, Borno State—over 100 of whom were still in captivity seven years later.<sup>116</sup>

In 2019, Ali Abacha weighed in—this time under the auspices of a different briefcase NGO—to praise Buhari and urge the House of Representatives to elect a speaker who did not have "a questionable past, tinted antecedents, and a barrage of court cases."<sup>117</sup> In doing so, he sought to discredit a frontrunner for the post and boost the candidacy of another legislator.<sup>118</sup> Yet even as he criticized corruption, Abacha was in the late stages of a long-running legal battle—which he finally lost in January 2021—to unfreeze off-shore accounts traced to him and relatives of his late brother in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Jersey, Liechtenstein, and Luxembourg.<sup>119</sup> Ali Abacha's lingering presence at the fringes of Nigeria's NGO sector is a reminder that its ruling elites are still using strategies from the military rule period to simultaneously pacify and co-opt civil society groups and silence calls for improved governance and guaranteed basic human rights.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

Riding higher than at any time since the end of military rule, Nigeria's pro-government NGOs are not a harmless nuisance or amusing political sideshow. Instead, they represent a meaningful threat to Nigeria's democratic development, social cohesion, and long-term stability. These groups' infiltration of one of Nigerian democracy's few remaining strongholds—its dynamic and independent civil society space—is accelerating. Its pace and scope have reached a point that should concern and prompt pushback from legitimate civil society actors, responsible media practitioners, reform-minded government officials, and international voices.



The rise of Nigeria's pro-government NGOs matters because it—

- **Emboldens bad actors.** Pro-government NGOs' illiberal rhetoric undermines domestic and international efforts to press Buhari, his military leaders, and police commanders to improve their dreadful human rights record. Their unstinting praise for the country's leadership also makes it harder for legitimate civil society groups to hold the government accountable, advocate against problematic policies, and push for greater transparency and public oversight. In doing so, pro-government NGOs help protect Nigeria's most abusive, illiberal, and corrupt public officials by attacking their adversaries.
- **Discredits the NGO sector.** The proliferation of pro-government NGOs has had a corrosive effect on Nigeria's civil society sector by undermining its collective legitimacy. In this sense, pro-government groups succeed even when they fail, because their very existence validates the cynicism many Nigerians feel toward domestic NGOs. As Daniel Jordan Smith notes, a large proportion Nigeria's NGOs were created in response to the growing availability of donor monies, contributing to the average citizen's belief that NGOs were somehow linked to a world of "fraud, deceit, and corruption."<sup>120</sup>
- **Skews public narratives.** Pro-government NGOs' partnerships with little-known media outlets and ready access to more established news platforms ensures that their anti-democratic rhetoric can reach a disproportionately wide audience. The verbatim coverage these outlets afford pro-government groups' performative press conferences suggests that they may be the result of brown-envelope journalism. Regardless, these groups' ability to negatively influence public narratives around democracy, good governance, and human rights is a cause for concern.
- **Negates international assistance.** Nigeria's legitimate civil society sector is the primary conduit for international assistance focused on democracy, good governance, and human rights promotion. Pro-government groups, in contrast, are authoritarian-leaning and frequently target internationally supported civil society groups. Their activities therefore negate a substantial amount of international assistance, meaning that donors' investments have less impact than anticipated.

## Feasible Solutions

What can be done to rein in Nigeria's pro-government NGOs and disincentivize their activities, given their damaging impact? Increased regulation of civil society groups is not the answer; top government officials have already signaled that they would use any new rules to restrict the activities of mainstream, independent NGOs and allow partisan regulators to turn a blind eye to the activities of unregistered, pro-government groups. Stricter regulations would, in other words, empower sycophantic groups by giving the government new tools to

pressure and punish its critics, especially pro-democracy and human rights groups sustained by international donors.

Instead of creating new rules, the Nigerian government should better enforce existing corporate laws, ensuring that all NGOs register with the Corporate Affairs Commission, identify a board of trustees, and submit annual financial reports to the commission.<sup>121</sup> Currently, very few pro-government NGOs comply with such basic rules. Ensuring they do so would make it more difficult for them to claim legitimacy as they carry out verbal hit-and-run attacks on behalf of government officials. Nigeria's tax enforcement and anti-corruption agencies should also investigate briefcase NGOs like those described here, particularly with respect to their sources of funding, tax compliance, and relationships with politically exposed persons.

Donors, diplomats, and development professionals, as well as legitimate domestic and international NGOs, also could do more to call out pro-government groups' toxic behaviors and exert pressure on their high-level sponsors. When these self-proclaimed civil society allies see briefcase NGOs championing illiberal and anti-democratic causes, they should speak out against such actions. In their private meetings, Nigerian civil society's international allies should also press senior government officials and military officers to stop covertly mobilizing and funding civil society surrogates. International diplomats could also levy visa bans on those pro-government NGO leaders that issue violent threats or spew hate speech.

For their part, Nigeria's mainstream media outlets—which include *Premium Times*, *Vanguard*, *This Day*, NTA (Nigerian Television Authority), and Channels—could undertake more due diligence on the activities of civil society groups. Instead of covering pro-government NGOs' cookie-cutter press conferences verbatim, they could ask *why* an unknown, unregistered group is heaping praise on government officials or attacking their critics. Journalists and their editors should look upon such stage-managed events with suspicion and refuse inducements to attend such events or place stories about them. Established media platforms that wish to maintain their credibility have a strong incentive to shun pro-government NGOs' thinly disguised propaganda. At the very least, they should publish such pieces as op-eds rather than factual news stories.

Nigeria's legitimate civil society organizations, meanwhile, could work together to adopt voluntary standards or a code of conduct that would help the media, government officials, and everyday Nigerians separate trustworthy NGOs from briefcase and for-hire groups. Nigerian civil society's international partners could facilitate this effort by supporting the establishment of an Open Civil Society Portal that could serve as a mechanism for both new and established NGOs to upload their corporate registration and tax documents, trustee details, and annual financial reports. Longer term, such a platform could also serve as a donor feedback and project monitoring mechanism, giving greater exposure to up-and-coming NGOs that operate according to established good practices.

In conclusion, a sustainable approach to mitigating the threat that pro-government NGOs pose to Nigerian democracy and stability does not require bold diplomatic action, jarring reforms, or expensive programmatic solutions. It can be addressed through a combination of informal strategies, including more assertive counter-messaging by mainstream NGOs, media due diligence, and targeted international engagement. Legitimate civil society groups could also petition the Corporate Affairs Commission and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission to investigate the most obvious of the fake NGOs and their leaders. From a social norms perspective, calling out pro-government NGOs and exposing their links to top officials will, over time, delegitimize them, defuse their anti-democratic messaging, and diminish their usefulness as surrogates. By doing so, those keen to advance democracy, good governance, and human rights would prove what the country's ruling elites already know: Nigeria's civil society sector is its strongest counterweight to their corrupt, abusive, and autocratic tendencies.



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