

Civil–Military Relations and The Rule of Law in Nigeria: A Case Study of The Wike–Naval Officer Confrontation Over Land in Abuja

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Abstract

Civil–military relations constitute a foundational pillar of democratic governance, particularly in post-authoritarian societies such as Nigeria, where the military has historically exerted significant political influence. This study examines civil–military tensions through a detailed analysis of the 2025 confrontation between Nigeria’s Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nyesom Wike, and an active-duty naval officer over a disputed parcel of land in Gaduwa, Abuja. Using qualitative methods and drawing on constitutional provisions, scholarly theories, media documentation, and legal expert commentary, the study interrogates the implications of the confrontation for the rule of law, civilian supremacy, and democratic accountability. The incident underscores persistent institutional ambiguities in Nigeria’s governance architecture, particularly concerning the misuse of military authority in civilian matters. The findings reveal that the deployment of armed naval personnel to obstruct lawful administrative activities demonstrates a breach of constitutional norms and highlights weaknesses in Nigeria’s civil oversight mechanisms. The study concludes by recommending institutional reforms aimed at strengthening civilian control, professionalizing military conduct, and reinforcing rule-of-law principles in land administration processes.

Keywords

Civil–Military Relations, Rule of Law, Abuja Land Dispute, Constitutionalism, Nyesom Wike, Nigerian Navy, Democratic Governance.

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1. Introduction

Civil–military relations have long remained a central theme of scholarly inquiry, especially in societies where the military has historically played a dominant role in political life. Nigeria is one such case, given its tumultuous political history marked by successive coups from 1966 to 1993, years of authoritarian military rule, and a gradual transition to democratic governance in 1999. Scholars such as Finer (1962), Luckham (1971), and Adejumo (2010) note that prolonged military involvement in state administration often leaves behind institutional residues, informal norms, power expectations, and behavioural patterns, that continue to influence military–civilian interactions even after democratic consolidation. As a result, despite over two decades of civilian rule, ambiguities persist in Nigeria regarding the boundaries of military authority and adherence to the rule of law.

A recent and widely discussed example occurred in November 2025, when the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nyesom Wike, engaged in a dramatic confrontation with an active-duty naval officer at Plot 1946, Gaduwa District, Abuja. According to reports by Onje (2025) and Igbonwelundu & Omokhunu (2025), the FCT Development Control Department had issued a stop-work order on a structure allegedly being erected without statutory approval. However, attempts by the FCTA enforcement team to halt the construction were obstructed by the naval officer, who claimed to be acting under a directive to “protect” the site. Multiple videos circulated on social media showed Wike challenging the legality of the naval officer’s presence, accusing him of undermining constituted authority and obstructing lawful administrative duties. The officer, in turn, insisted that he had “orders from above,” a refrain critic often associate with past military regimes.

The confrontation sparked widespread debate, not merely because of its dramatic nature but because it touched on fundamental questions about civil authority, military professionalism, and constitutional supremacy in Nigeria’s democratic framework. Legal scholars were quick to react. Prof. Sebastine Hon (SAN), speaking to the Atungwu (2025), argued that the naval officer lacked any statutory or constitutional backing to deploy armed personnel to a

private construction site. Hon emphasized that operational deployment of soldiers must fall within clearly defined legal parameters, such as internal security duties authorized by the President or engagement under Section 217 of the Constitution, which outlines military functions. Anything outside these parameters, he contended, risks breaching not only the Constitution but also the Armed Forces Act and established military codes of conduct.

Section 302 of the 1999 Constitution vests the administration and management of all land in the Federal Capital Territory in the FCT Minister, acting as the President's representative (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Therefore, obstructing the Minister or designated officials from carrying out legally mandated oversight functions raises serious concerns about civilian oversight, the rule of law, and institutional accountability. Scholars such as Ogundiya (2010) and Adedire & Olanrewaju (2020) have warned that when security agencies act beyond their statutory limits, they erode democratic norms and contribute to governance instability.

Beyond the legal dimensions, the public reaction highlighted broader anxieties about Nigeria's civil-military equilibrium. Many Nigerians recalled past incidents where military officers clashed with civilians or state officials – such as the 2014 Army-DSS dispute in Lagos, the 2020 #EndSARS military deployments, and various instances of soldiers intervening in land disputes, checkpoints, or community conflicts. As noted by Abiodun and Aremu (2021), these recurring tensions suggest that despite reforms, the Nigerian military continues to grapple with defining its role in a democratic setting, particularly regarding restraint, professionalism, and respect for civilian authority.

Against this backdrop, the Wike-naval officer confrontation provides a timely and relevant case study for analysing the complex and evolving relationship between Nigeria's civilian authorities and its military establishment. It also offers an opportunity to interrogate broader rule-of-law challenges, institutional weaknesses, and the lingering legacies of military rule that continue to shape Nigeria's governance landscape. This paper therefore situates the incident within the wider scholarship on civil-military relations, constitutionalism, and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

A. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- Examine the confrontation between Wike and the naval officer as an expression of civil-military dynamics in Nigeria.
- Analyse the rule-of-law implications of military involvement in a civilian land dispute.
- Assess the conformity of the officer's actions to military professionalism and constitutional subordination.

2. Conceptual Review

A. Civil-Military Relations

Civil-military relations refer to the patterns of interaction, power distribution, and institutional relationships between civilian political authorities and the armed forces within a state. Traditionally, scholars examine how civilian leaders maintain control over the military, how the military behaves within political systems, and how both institutions contribute to national security and democratic stability (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 1999).

In democratic systems, civil-military relations emphasize civilian supremacy, professional military conduct, and clear boundaries between military authority and civilian governance. Huntington (1957) argues for "objective civilian control," where the military is politically neutral and professionally competent, while Janowitz (1960) emphasizes a more integrated model where the military internalizes democratic norms. In the Nigerian context, civil-military relations are shaped by decades of military rule, coups, and intervention in political affairs. These historical experiences have produced institutional tensions and occasional role ambiguity (Ogundiya, 2010). Thus, the concept is vital for understanding cases such as the Wike-Naval officer confrontation, which highlight ongoing struggles over authority, legitimacy, and adherence to constitutional protocols.

B. Rule of Law

The rule of law is a foundational governance principle asserting that all individuals and institutions, government officials, the military, and private citizens – are bound by and accountable under laws that are publicly known, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated (Dicey, 1959). It requires consistency, fairness, due process, and protection from arbitrary power. In modern democracies, the rule of law safeguards against abuses of authority

by ensuring that coercive institutions, such as the military, operate within legally defined mandates (Tamanaha, 2004).

Nigeria's constitutional framework places significant emphasis on the rule of law as a means of preventing authoritarian overreach and maintaining democratic order. However, gaps in enforcement, institutional weaknesses, and occasional disregard for legal boundaries by security agencies underscore ongoing challenges (Adedire & Olanrewaju, 2020). The Wike–Naval officer incident exemplifies tensions that arise when legal authority, embodied in FCT administrative powers, is confronted by unauthorized military intervention.

C. Constitutional Supremacy

Constitutional supremacy is the doctrine that the constitution is the highest source of law and that all governmental actions, including those of the armed forces, must derive legitimacy from constitutional provisions. In Nigeria, Section 1(1) of the 1999 Constitution unequivocally states that the Constitution is supreme, and any law or action inconsistent with it is void.

This concept is vital for delineating authority in civil–military contexts. For example, military deployment for internal purposes must align with Sections 217–218 of the Constitution, which outline the roles, command structure, and limitations of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Any military action undertaken outside these stipulations violates constitutional supremacy and undermines democratic governance (Adedire & Olanrewaju, 2020). Thus, the confrontation involving the FCT Minister and a naval officer raises questions about the military's respect for constitutionally defined roles—particularly regarding land-use authority, which is vested in the FCT Minister under Section 302 of the Constitution.

D. Military Professionalism

Military professionalism refers to the commitment of armed forces to ethical conduct, discipline, political neutrality, respect for civilian authority, and adherence to established legal and institutional norms. It includes specialized expertise, a sense of corporate responsibility, and loyalty to the state rather than to individual actors (Janowitz, 1960; Ebo, 2005).

Professional militaries operate within well-defined parameters that prevent interference in civilian governance, private disputes, or administrative processes. A professional military in a democracy is expected to uphold the rule of law, respond to lawful civilian directives, and maintain apolitical behaviour (Feaver, 2003). In Nigeria, efforts to strengthen military professionalism have advanced since the return to democracy in 1999, yet incidents such as involvement in domestic disputes, unauthorized deployment of soldiers, and confrontations with civilians signal persistent challenges (Abiodun & Aremu, 2021). The Wike–Naval officer incident highlights the implications of lapses in military professionalism—particularly the misuse of military personnel in matters outside their constitutional mandate.

3. Theoretical Review

A. Huntington's Objective Civilian Control Theory

Samuel P. Huntington's (1957) objective civilian control theory remains one of the foundational frameworks for understanding civil–military relations in democratic settings. Huntington argues that stable civil–military relations depend on a clear separation between the political roles of civilian leaders and the professional functions of the military. Under this model, civilian authorities define national goals and policies, while the military confines itself strictly to executing operational and tactical responsibilities. The theory rests on three pillars: military professionalism, political neutrality, and subordination to civilian authority.

According to Huntington, when the military becomes involved in civilian governance, local disputes, private matters, or political contestations, the boundary between its professional sphere and the civilian domain becomes blurred. Such behaviour risks undermining democratic authority and fostering conditions for authoritarian tendencies or institutional conflict.

The Wike–naval officer confrontation directly illustrates a deviation from Huntington's ideal model. Rather than maintaining professional detachment, the naval officer reportedly deployed military personnel to a civilian land

dispute—an action that exceeds constitutionally defined military functions. This reflects what Huntington would describe as a breakdown in objective civilian control, where the military intrudes into administrative matters reserved for civilian institutions. In the Nigerian context, where legacies of military rule still influence institutional behaviour, the event underscores persistent challenges in cultivating a fully professional, politically neutral military establishment (Adedire, S., & Olanrewaju, 2020).

B. Rule-of-Law Theory

Rule-of-Law Theory offers a second crucial framework for analysing the incident. Broadly, rule-of-law theorists argue that democratic governance is sustained only when all individuals and institutions, regardless of rank or power, act within the limits of established legal frameworks (Dicey, 1959; Tamanaha, 2004). The rule of law embodies principles such as constitutional supremacy, due process, equal application of the law, and institutional accountability.

Tamanaha (2004) emphasizes that the erosion of the rule of law occurs when powerful actors operate outside legal constraints, selectively apply laws, or undermine institutional procedures. In such conditions, the legal order becomes distorted, allowing coercive actors, like the military—to wield power outside constitutional prescriptions.

The Abuja incident reflects this theoretical concern. The deployment of armed military personnel to defend a land claim, without any lawful authorization or constitutional mandate, violates Nigeria's rule-of-law principles. Section 302 of the 1999 Constitution vests land administration authority in the FCT Minister, not the armed forces. Therefore, obstructing a lawfully empowered civilian official signifies a breach of constitutional order and demonstrates how deviations from the rule of law can create institutional tension and weaken democratic governance. As rule-of-law theorists warn, once military or political actors begin to disregard legal boundaries, democratic norms become vulnerable to systemic decay (Tamanaha, 2004).

C. Empirical Review

Empirical and scholarly evidence indicates that tensions between civilian authorities and military institutions are a recurring feature of African governance, particularly in post-authoritarian states where the military retains informal influence despite democratic transitions. Chazema et al. (2025) note that unclear institutional boundaries and competing perceptions of authority between civilian and military actors create friction in democratic processes. Ayoko (2025) highlights that in Nigeria, historical legacies of military dominance and weak civilian oversight continue to shape interactions between security agencies and government institutions. Lateef (2025) emphasizes that ambiguous chains of command and institutional weaknesses often exacerbate these tensions, resulting in challenges for governance and democratic consolidation. These insights provide a comparative framework for situating the Wike–naval officer confrontation within broader African patterns of civil–military engagement.

Empirical evidence from media reports, video documentation, expert commentary, and public reactions further illustrates these dynamics in the Nigerian context. Onje (2025) reported that the contested property at Plot 1946 in Gaduwa District lacked legally approved building permits from the Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA). FCTA officials had issued a stop-work order as part of routine development control operations, but enforcement was obstructed by armed naval personnel claiming to secure the site. BusinessDay (2025) highlighted procedural irregularities and noted that government agencies frequently encounter resistance when attempting to implement regulatory authority in Abuja—reflecting the types of civil–military friction identified by Chazema et al. (2025).

Adebayo (2025) released widely circulated video footage showing the confrontation between FCT Minister Nyesom Wike and the naval officer. The footage captured Wike accusing the officer of leveraging military privilege to interfere in land administration and potentially facilitate illegal land acquisition. Analysis of social media responses indicated that many Nigerians perceived the incident as symptomatic of broader institutional tensions between civilian authorities and security agencies, echoing Ayoko's (2025) observation that historical military dominance continues to influence public perceptions and institutional behaviour.

Expert commentary further reinforces the legal dimensions of the incident. Atungwu (2025) cited constitutional lawyer Prof. Sebastine Hon (SAN), who argued that the naval officer's conduct violated Nigerian military law and

Supreme Court precedents. Hon emphasized that military personnel are not obligated to obey unlawful orders lacking constitutional authorization, highlighting legal norms governing obedience, chain of command, and operational boundaries. Lateef (2025) similarly notes that such ambiguities in institutional authority and operational roles can generate recurring tensions between civil authorities and military actors, as illustrated in this confrontation.

Onilede (2025) contextualized the event within the constitutional framework of land administration in the FCT, reiterating that Section 302 of the 1999 Constitution empowers the FCT Minister, acting on behalf of the President, to oversee land allocation, development control, and urban planning. Human rights advocates, including activist Omoyele Sowore, framed the incident as an “institutional crisis,” reflecting persistent patterns of military encroachment into civilian governance spaces - a pattern consistent with the regional trends highlighted by Chazema et al. (2025).

Conversely, scholarly analyses suggest that public interpretations of civil–military confrontations are often divided, particularly among retired military personnel and security elites. Ayoko (2025) observes that Nigeria’s civil–military relations continue to be shaped by enduring norms of hierarchy, professional identity, and respect for uniform, which can influence how military actors and their affiliates perceive civilian authority. From this perspective, confrontational or emotionally charged engagement by civilian officials may be interpreted as disrespectful to military professionalism. This suggests that, beyond legal and institutional considerations, communication dynamics and institutional culture significantly influence civil–military relations and public perceptions of authority, aligning with Lateef’s (2025) emphasis on the role of operational ambiguity and institutional norms in shaping governance outcomes.

Taken together, these empirical sources demonstrate the multidimensional nature of the Wike–naval officer confrontation. They reveal a clash of authority, institutional expectations, legal interpretations, stakeholder perceptions, and cultural understandings of military status within Nigerian society. By combining media documentation, expert legal analysis, eyewitness accounts, public responses, and insights from recent African literature, the study establishes a robust empirical foundation for analysing the broader implications of the incident for Nigeria’s democratic governance and civil–military equilibrium.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach to examine civil–military relations and adherence to the rule of law in Nigeria, using the Wike–Naval Officer confrontation over land in Abuja as a focal case. The case-study design is appropriate for analysing a contemporary event that reveals broader institutional tensions between civilian authority and military power within a democratic setting.

Data were drawn from secondary sources, including reputable national and international news reports, verified video evidence, legal expert commentary, relevant provisions of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), and academic literature on civil–military relations and democratic governance. These sources were purposively selected to ensure credibility, relevance, and triangulation, thereby reducing reliance on any single narrative.

The study utilizes thematic content analysis, with data coded around key themes such as civilian control of the military, constitutional authority, rule of law, and institutional accountability. This analytical approach facilitates systematic interpretation of civil–military interactions within the case. While triangulation across multiple sources strengthens the validity of the findings, the study is limited by the absence of primary data, including interviews with military or government officials, which restricts deeper insight into internal institutional perspectives. Nevertheless, the methodology remains suitable for drawing analytically grounded conclusions about civil–military relations in Nigeria.

5. Findings

Analysis of the available data reveals several important patterns regarding the Wike–Naval officer confrontation, shedding light on persistent challenges in Nigeria’s civil–military relations and adherence to the rule of law.

A. Erosion of Civilian Supremacy

Media reports and video evidence show that the deployment of armed military personnel to obstruct the FCT Minister’s enforcement of a stop-work order directly challenged civilian authority (Onje, 2025). This incident suggests that, despite constitutional empowerment, civilian officials can still face resistance from military actors. It reflects lingering militaristic privilege and entrenched patterns of influence, highlighting the difficulty of fully consolidating civilian supremacy in Nigeria’s governance structures.

B. Violation of the Rule of Law

Expert commentary, particularly from Prof. Sebastine Hon (SAN), underscores that the naval officer’s justification of acting on “orders from above” lacked legal validity (Atungwu, 2025). The analysis indicates a clear consensus that the military overstepped its constitutional mandate. This situation exposes a systemic vulnerability, where formal rules and civilian directives can be bypassed by institutional authority, demonstrating the ongoing tension between law and power in Nigerian governance.

C. Strain on Military Professionalism

Deploying soldiers to protect private land clearly undermines professional military norms, as highlighted in Huntington’s (1957) and Janowitz’s (1960) frameworks. The incident reveals weaknesses in discipline, adherence to the chain of command, and operational integrity. It shows how military professionalism is compromised when personnel engage in activities beyond their lawful duties, blurring the line between public service and private interests.

D. Institutional Impunity and Privilege

Reports indicate that the land in question was linked to a former Chief of Naval Staff (Adebayo, 2025). This connection points to a broader pattern of impunity, where individuals with institutional influence can circumvent due process. Such actions reinforce elite privilege and weaken accountability mechanisms, highlighting structural issues in both civil and military institutions.

E. Public Reaction

Reactions from the public and civil society reveal a divide in perceptions. Many applauded Wike for standing firm on constitutional authority, while retired military personnel emphasized respect for decorum and procedural propriety (Ayoko, 2025). This divergence reflects broader societal tensions regarding the balance between civilian oversight and military respect, as well as differing expectations of how institutions should interact.

In short, the confrontation is not an isolated incident but symptomatic of deeper structural and institutional challenges in Nigeria. It underscores enduring issues with civilian supremacy, compliance with the rule of law, military professionalism, and the influence of elite privilege, illustrating the complexity of civil–military relations in a democratic context.

Table 1: Results Summary of the Wike–Naval Officer Confrontation

| Result Category | Empirical Evidence | Key Finding | Implication for Civil–Military Relations |
|------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Civilian Supremacy | Obstruction of FCTA stop-work order by armed naval personnel (Onje, 2025) | Civilian authority was directly challenged despite constitutional mandate | Indicates incomplete consolidation of civilian supremacy in Nigeria |
| Rule of Law | Justification of military action based on “orders from above” (Atungwu, 2025) | Actions lacked constitutional or statutory authorization | Reveals tension between formal legal authority and informal power structures |
| Military Professionalism | Deployment of soldiers to protect private land (Telegraph Nigeria, 2025) | Military engaged beyond lawful operational roles | Undermines professional norms and discipline within the armed forces |
| Institutional Accountability | Alleged link between land and former naval leadership (Telegraph Nigeria, 2025) | Elite influence may shield unlawful actions | Highlights persistence of institutional privilege and impunity |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|
| Constitutional Authority | Section 302 FCT land oversight powers (Onilede, 2025) | FCT Minister acted within constitutional mandate | Obstruction represents institutional challenge to constitutional supremacy |
| Public Perception | Mixed public and civil society reactions | Society divided on legality versus decorum | Demonstrates normative tension between civilian control and military respect |
| Institutional Culture | Emphasis on hierarchy and respect for uniform (Ayoko, 2025) | Cultural norms shape interpretation of authority | Shows non-legal factors influence civil–military relations |
| Comparative African Context | Patterns in post-authoritarian African states (Chazema et al., 2025; Lateef, 2025) | Unclear boundaries common across Africa | Situates Nigeria within broader regional civil–military dynamics |

6. Conclusion

The Wike–naval officer confrontation is emblematic of deeper structural issues in Nigeria’s civil–military relations. It illustrates how military actors may exploit institutional ambiguity to encroach upon civilian authority, undermining rule-of-law principles and constitutional governance. Strengthening democratic oversight is therefore essential.

Recommendations

First, clear laws should explicitly prohibit military involvement in private land matters. This would remove ambiguity about the military’s role and protect civilian authority and democratic processes. Second, civilian oversight institutions must be strengthened. Bodies like National Assembly defence committees should have the power to supervise military activities and hold officers accountable, ensuring enforcement of the law and building public trust.

Third, military training should emphasize constitutional obedience, respect for civilian leadership, and professional ethics. Officers need to understand their limits and operate within democratic norms to maintain a disciplined, apolitical force. Fourth, digitizing and publishing FCT land records would make land ownership and approvals transparent, reducing disputes and opportunities for abuse.

Fifth, strict enforcement against unlawful military actions is necessary. Officers acting outside their legal mandate should face consequences, reinforcing the rule of law. Finally, a civil–military code of engagement should be established. Clear guidelines on roles, responsibilities, and procedures would prevent misunderstandings, reduce tension, and promote cooperation between civilian authorities and the military.

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