

Who Belongs Where? The Politics of Internal Deportation, Nativism and Migration in Nigeria

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In Nigeria's federal system, certain states impose mobility restrictions that result in the internal deportation of citizens to their so-called 'states of origin'. This paper investigates this practice through a case study of the Lagos State government's deportation of Nigerians labelled as 'non-indigenes'. While existing scholarship primarily frames such actions as violations of human and constitutional rights, less attention has been given to their role within the broader frameworks of migration governance. Drawing on nativism theory and employing qualitative content analysis of government press releases and media reports related to two high-profile cases from 2013 and 2024, the study argues that internal deportation functions as an exclusionary state policy aimed at regulating mobility along ethnic and regional lines. The analysis demonstrates how state officials legitimise these practices through exclusionary rhetoric, security narratives, and nativist labelling, discursive strategies commonly associated with international migration regimes, to reinforce negative perceptions of internal migrants. It concludes that internal deportation in Nigeria reflects a structural weakness in Nigeria's federal arrangement, which reinforces social inequalities. The paper contributes to scholarship on migration politics in federal states and calls for policy reforms to safeguard constitutional protections and promote inclusive internal mobility.

Keywords: Internal migration, Internal deportation, Nativism, Lagos State, Indigeneity

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1. Introduction

In May 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when global deaths were rising and lockdowns enforced immobility, some constituent states in Nigeria took actions that not only defied public health logic but also endangered lives. Rather than restricting movement to limit the spread of the virus, these states actively engaged in forced internal mobility. Agbedo (2020), reporting for *The Guardian Nigeria*, reported that states such as Kano, Kaduna, and Benue forcibly *deported* Nigerian citizens from their territories to other parts of the country. The reports states that:

The Kano State Commissioner for Local Government, Murtala Garo, last Sunday, disclosed that 419 almajiris² had been deported to Katsina, 524 to Jigawa and 155 to Kaduna, totalling 1,098. The Kaduna State government has also reportedly deported 40 almajiris to Kebbi State government while Benue State government has evacuated 17 to Bauchi and 42 to Katsina states, respectively, bringing the total to 59. (Agbedo, 2020)

Thus, over 2,000 Nigerians were reportedly deported across state lines by officials acting on behalf of various state governments. This phenomenon of deporting Nigerian citizens from one location to another within Nigeria contradicts and violates core provisions of the Nigerian Constitution, particularly those that guarantee freedom of movement and assembly within the federation.

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of movement and assembly, the forced removal of Nigerian citizens within national borders has persisted for decades. As a result, many seeking to settle freely across the country continue encountering structural and political barriers to mobility. Existing discussions on internal deportation in Nigeria have primarily focused on legal violations of citizens' rights and constitutional provisions, as well as the illegality of such actions (Falana, 2013; Ikebude and Agunbiade, 2014; Patrick, Khalema and Abiolu, 2021), alongside the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the practice (Nwakanma, 2013). However, little attention has been given to internal deportation through the lens of migration, particularly in terms of how it functions as a tool of migration governance. This paper addresses that gap by examining how internal deportations by the Lagos State Government serve as

² Almajiris are children who beg for alms.

instruments of migration governance within Nigeria's federal system and what they reveal about the role of nativism in internal mobility control. The analysis is grounded in nativism theory and based on content analysis of government press releases and media reports.

Although deportation incidents have occurred across several constituent states within Nigeria's federal system, this paper draws on secondary data from two cases carried out by the Lagos State government. As Nigeria's commercial hub and former capital, Lagos is one of the most populous and economically dominant states, with a high internally generated revenue (IGR). The two specific episodes are the deportation of Nigerian citizens by the Lagos State government to various other parts of Nigeria that occurred on 24 July 2013 and 6 May 2024. These deportations are not isolated incidents. As noted earlier, similar actions have occurred across Nigeria. Most recently, Liman (2025) reports that 114 citizens were deported in February 2025 from Ondo State to northern Nigeria.

There have been reports in May 2025 of fresh raids in Lagos, which suggest that further deportations by the Lagos State government may be underway. Due to their scale and frequency, the Lagos State government's actions have drawn public attention. Despite legal challenges from some deportees, the government has continued these practices, often winning legal actions brought against it. The two selected incidents are analytically useful because they provoked both public and legal responses and provide rich material for examining internal deportation as a mode of governance.

This paper depicts internal deportation as an exclusionary policy implemented by a constituent state government to restrict mobility within a federal system. It situates internal deportation within a broader continuum linking internal and international migration regulation. The findings suggest that internal deportation is used as a state policy to privilege certain groups allowed to remain in Lagos while marginalising others through removal; it also reveals how state officials legitimise exclusionary practices, exposing structural weaknesses in Nigeria's federal system. Moreover, the paper shows how nativist labelling, exclusionary rhetoric, and security discourses, common in international migration regimes, are similarly used to justify internal deportations and reinforce negative perceptions of internal migrants. This study contributes to scholarship on migration politics in federal states and calls for policy reforms to uphold constitutional rights and freedoms.

Following this introduction, the paper begins with a brief overview of Nigeria's political and historical context. It then outlines the conceptual framework and defines the key terms that

inform the analysis. The subsequent sections present and analyse two key episodes of internal deportation from Lagos State to Anambra and Osun States, followed by a discussion of the nativist rhetoric of international migration regimes found in the internal migration control practices observed in Nigeria and the conclusion.

2. Background: Federalism, Conflict, and Constitutional Rights in Nigeria³

Nigeria operates a federal system comprising 36 constituent states, 768 Local Government Areas (LGAs), and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) (Kifordu, 2013). Nigeria has three tiers of government: the federal government at the centre, the state governments, and the local governments at the grassroots level.

The origins of this federal system can be traced back to Nigeria's colonial and postcolonial history. In the precolonial period, there was no entity called Nigeria. The country is a product of the British colonial administration (Bourne, 2015; Ellis, 2016; Verjee, 2017; Olumba, 2023), and it gained independence on October 1st, 1960. Upon independence, Nigeria adopted a parliamentary system of governance with a head of state, a prime minister, and political leaders for each of the four regions: North, East, West, and Mid-West (Kifordu, 2013). The First Republic was short-lived. A coup on January 15th, 1966, led to the assassination of several politicians (Falola and Heaton, 2008; Bourne, 2015). Although the coup failed, military leaders who suppressed it assumed power and began ruling by decree (Ejiogu, 2007; Ellis, 2016). They replaced the parliamentary system with a unitary system governed by military elites.

Subsequent events led to a counter-coup on July 28th, 1966 (Korieh, 2013), which brought a new group of military officers to power (Korieh, 2013; Taipale, 2017). The aftermath of this coup included pogroms in Northern Nigeria targeting people from the South-East, resulting in the deaths of over 34,000 people and the mass displacement of the Igbo population back to the East (Taipale, 2017; Seibert, 2018; McAlister, 2023).

This wave of violence and political marginalisation prompted the Igbo and other eastern ethnic groups to declare the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian government launched a military campaign to prevent secession, resulting in a civil war that lasted 30 months (Vonnegut, 1975; McAlister, 2023). Over two million Igbos died from hunger and starvation during the war, which ended with Nigeria regaining control of Biafran territories (Forsyth, 1969; Taipale,

³ While a more detailed discussion of Nigeria's historical and political context could have been provided, such analyses are well represented in the existing literature. The brief overview included here is intended primarily to orient readers who may be less familiar with these discussions.

2017). While the war continued, the second military government divided Nigeria's four regions into 12 states in 1967, a political move intended to weaken Biafran cohesion (Kifordu, 2013).

Post-war Nigeria remained politically unstable, marked by successive military coups and brief civilian interludes. In 1979, the military conducted elections and handed power to a civilian government (Bourne, 2015), but this was short-lived. Another coup occurred on December 31st, 1983, initiating another extended period of military rule that lasted until the death of General Sani Abacha on June 8th, 1998. Abacha's death created space for democratic transition. General Abdulsalami Abubakar oversaw elections, and former military leader Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as president on May 29th, 1999. The 1999 Constitution, drafted under the military government, has guided Nigeria's democracy since. Though there has been no military interruption since then, the state of affairs continues to deteriorate due to corruption, insecurity, poverty, terrorism, and other systemic issues.

Amid these broader governance issues, the rights of Nigerian citizens remain enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. Every citizen is legally entitled to freedom of movement, residence, and association. These constitutional guarantees require both federal and state governments to protect such liberties. Mobility restrictions can only apply to individuals facing criminal prosecution or those lawfully detained. No state government is authorised to restrict the movement of citizens outside such legal conditions.

3. Conceptual framing

This paper is based on a content analysis of press releases from the Lagos, Anambra, and Osun State governments, and reports from reputable Nigerian media outlets, including *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers. It focuses on two deportation incidents on 24 July 2013 and 6 May 2024. The analysis draws on media reports and official responses from the Lagos State government, which carried out the deportations, as well as reactions from the states that received the deported individuals.

This approach captures the frames and narratives presented by the Lagos State government, deportees, and receiving state governments, as reflected in the media. Drawing on these sources, the paper examines how internal deportation is framed and legitimised, despite appearing unconstitutional in a federal system, and how it relates to broader international migration regimes and affects the individuals involved.

This practice can also be understood through what Newth (2023) describes as ‘groupness’ in social relations, which draws boundaries between people, classifying some as ‘natives’⁴ and others as ‘foreigners’. Campbell-Bethancourt *et al.* (2025) refer to this as selective solidarity, where individuals labelled as ‘migrants’ are perceived as a threat to those considered indigenes. These distinctions and exclusions are captured by the concept of nativism, which this paper uses as its core analytical lens. Nativism has been defined as

a racist and xenophobic discourse structured around an exclusionary vision of ‘the nation’ in which the ‘native’ is discursively constructed as a disadvantaged and threatened ‘in-group’ through its juxtaposition along antagonistic and horizontal lines to a racialised ‘non-native’, ‘foreigner’, or ‘non-integrated co-citizen’. (Newth, 2023, 172)

When internal deportation is examined through the lens of nativism, it entails the selective detention and removal of Nigerian citizens by constituent units of the federal state to another state; specifically, individuals labelled as ‘non-indigenes’, as outsiders and potential threats. Thus, Internal deportation entails the selective detention and removal of Nigerian citizens labelled as ‘non-indigenes’, outsiders and potential threats to the indigenes from one state to another by constituent units of the Nigerian federal state. These actions portray them as people who do not belong to Lagos state, despite their legal citizenship, and justify their exclusion by forcefully returning them to their so-called places of origin within Nigeria.

This practice raises critical questions about who is considered an indigene and who is not, and, more broadly, what it means to be a citizen in Nigeria. Although the Nigerian Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to move freely and reside in any part of the country, the persistent dichotomy between ‘indigene’ and ‘non-indigene’ undermines these constitutional protections.

Scholars have traced this division to colonial governance practices. British policies such as indirect rule politicised ethnic identities and fostered division among colonised groups, ensuring internal conflicts that distracted them to ensure colonial domination and less resistance (Nnoli, 1971; Tseayo, 1975; Ochonu, 2014). One such policy, the ‘Ring Fence Policy’ introduced in 1917 (Olumba, 2023), classified communities into ‘natives’ and ‘settlers’ based on perceived ancestral ties to land (Dorward, 1969; Fardon, 2015). It fostered hostility

⁴ Wherever the term ‘native’ is used in this paper, it reflects the original wording of the source. I share the view, common among scholars from and of Indigenous communities, that the term is derogatory.

between groups like the Jukun and Tiv, who had previously enjoyed a cooperative relationship (Akombo, 2005). These colonial-era discourses of belonging and exclusion continue to shape contemporary understandings of indigeneity and citizenship in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, being classified as a ‘native’ or ‘settler’ is not determined by birthplace or residence but by contested narratives and perceived ancestral ties (Higazi, 2016; Bamidele, 2018b; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018). ‘To be considered as an indigene of a place in this manner implies that one can point to a region as one’s ‘local land’ where one has its parentage’ (Bamidele, 2018b, p. 55). Thus, the status of an indigene is often claimed through family stories that mark inclusion or exclusion from a village, making it rooted in collective memory (Olumba, 2024a, p. 487). Therefore, even if a person’s paternal parents were born in a particular town or city, and the person themselves were born there, the family may still not be regarded as indigenes but as settlers, who are assumed to return to their community in their ‘state of origin’ someday. Nigeria is a patrilineal society where descent and origin are traced through the father's lineage and the male children are viewed as custodians of family heritage and inheritance rights, yet familial bonds often remain deeply rooted in maternal relationships (Onyebueke, Nwosu and Uwaezuoke, 2024; Kperogi, 2025).

However, sometimes if one’s maternal parent is not indigenous to a particular location, despite the person’s paternal lineage being rooted there, it can be used as a political tool to challenge their claim to indigeneity, particularly in the context of high-level government positions. In the last election, one of the gubernatorial candidates in Lagos State faced intense political attacks from the ruling party because his mother was not from Lagos, even though his paternal family is considered among the ‘sons of the soil’. According to Ogundamisi (2023), the Labour Party’s candidate in the 2023 Lagos State gubernatorial election, Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour

‘... married an Igbo lady and his mother being Igbo thus [it was framed by his opponents that] he would not be ‘loyal to Yoruba’. Ordinarily this shouldn’t matter, but you must understand Nigeria’s intra ethnic suspicion and fault lines; these fault lines can work for or against a candidate, depending on the circumstances ...’

This example highlights how maternal lineage, when seen as ‘foreign’, can become a liability in Nigeria’s political landscape, particularly when seeking office or accessing certain state benefits.

According to *The Guardian* and *Tribune* newspapers, Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour, who was crowned with the title *Obalefun – Olori Obatala*, is recognised as an indigene of Lagos State (Amos, 2025; Badmus, 2025). The ‘Head of Olobatala’, Chief Abiodun Oloyede, was quoted as saying that ‘Gbadebo is a bona fide son of the soil, not only of Yoruba land generally but also a true indigene of Lagos State, hailing from one of the IBILE Divisions, specifically Lagos Island, in the Oke Popo area’ (Badmus, 2025).

Thus, in Nigeria, ‘natives’ or indigenes and settlers do not enjoy equal access to resources, particularly in relation to economic and political opportunities within communities and states, especially when it concerns government positions and appointments (Bamidele, 2018b, 2018a; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018, p. 475). These distinctions between two categories of Nigerian citizens are institutionalised and sustained over time (Olumba, 2024a). For these reasons and more, ‘... people preserve and propagate indigeneity by disseminating both constructed and valid familial histories and recollections’ (Olumba, 2024a, p. 487).

It is on the basis of this dichotomy between categories of Nigerian citizens that many constituent state governments have built their rhetoric of protecting indigenes while deporting those considered foreigners. A person’s ‘state of origin’ is determined by their ability to prove indigeneity to a specific community and local government, usually documented in a ‘certificate of origin’ issued by local authorities (Fourchard, 2015, p. 42). These certificates are required for enrolment in government jobs such as the army, police, or navy. Individuals are excluded from such opportunities without them, as allocations are distributed based on state of origin.

The history of the exclusion of non-indigenes in administrative positions is older than the history of quotas in the federal bureaucracy and strongly embedded in the colonial and postcolonial history of Nigeria. During the colonial period, Native Authorities had sole responsibility for recruitment into the civil service. (Fourchard, 2015, p. 41).

Quoting Oka Orewa and Adewumi (1983), Fourchard (2015) observed that recruitment practices during the colonial period were restricted to ‘natives’, and the colonial administration deliberately refrained from interfering in this process. Therefore, those unable to prove their ‘state of origin’ may be subjected to nativist actions designed to safeguard the urban space for so-called indigenes. This may include ordinary citizens being randomly picked from the streets and deported to other states in Nigeria or elites whose indigeneity is questioned and used as a tool to block their access to public office by labelling them as ‘non-indigenes’.

As noted earlier, Newth (2023) argues that such discourses, which frame ‘natives’ as under threat and in need of protection from those labelled as ‘foreigners’, are nativist, as they are not only exclusionary but also discriminate against those seen as members of the ‘out-group’.

5. Governing Mobility in Lagos: Deportation, Discourse, and Exclusion

This section provides a detailed account of two deportation cases and the justifications given by the Lagos State government. It draws on media reports, reactions from the receiving states, and narratives from some of the deported individuals. These accounts are analysed as forms of migration policy that rely on exclusion and discrimination, viewed through a nativist framework.

2013 Deportation to Anambra State

The first paragraph of *Premium Times*, one of Nigeria’s reputable newspapers, dated August 1, 2013, reads: ‘Over 60 destitute people were deported to Anambra by the Lagos government’ (Ezeamalu, 2013). It further states that ‘On July 24, 72 evictees were dumped, under the cover of darkness, at Upper Iweka Bridge, Onitsha, the commercial hub of Anambra State’. In response, the paper reports, ‘Governor Peter Obi of Anambra State⁵ has threatened to carry out a reprisal following the deportation of beggars and destitute people by the Lagos State Government to the South Eastern state’ (Ezeamalu, 2013).

In other words, the Lagos State government deported 72 Nigerian citizens, labelled as ‘destitute’, from Lagos to Onitsha, a city in Anambra State, over six hours away by bus, crossing multiple state boundaries. In response, the Anambra State government, in a letter to then-President Dr Goodluck Jonathan, described the actions of the Lagos State government as ‘illegal, unconstitutional, and a blatant violation of human rights’, as reported by Ezeamalu (2013) for the *Premium Times*.

According to the report by Ezeamalu (2013), the Lagos State government claimed they ‘resettled’ the individuals because they preferred to return to their ‘hometowns’. However, Joe Igbokwe, the Publicity Secretary of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the ruling party in Lagos at the time, stated:

We should note that other states in the South, including South West states have received such people and the Lagos State government has been careful

⁵ The Anambra State Government under Peter Obi was criticised for hypocrisy on this issue; according to Tukur (2013), prior to the 2013 deportation from Lagos, Anambra had itself deported Nigerian citizens to Akwa Ibom and Ebonyi states.

to ensure that the number of people involved in such periodic movements are minimal and are only people who do not have where to stay in Lagos, who don't have any real engagement in Lagos and who constitute nuisance to other Lagosians. (Ezeamalu, 2013)

From being framed as 'destitutes' who requested to be 'resettled' to their 'hometowns', Joe Igbokwe portrayed them as people with no purpose in Lagos, and thus a 'nuisance' to those he considers to be 'Lagosians' who deserve protection. This rhetorical shift, from depicting the deported as 'destitutes' to framing them as a threat, reflects the logic of nativism. As Newth (2023) argues, nativism is an exclusionary and discriminatory discourse used to justify actions that protect the privileged at the expense of those labelled as outsiders. The political elites in the Lagos state deemed it legitimate to conduct such actions to protect those labelled as 'Lagosians'. The reported deportation of 72 Nigerians on July 24, 2013, was not only covered by *Premium Times*; other reputable media outlets, including *Vanguard* (Ujumadu, 2013), *Daily Trust* (Doki, 2013), and *Sahara Reporters* (Falana, 2013), also reported the story, which was further broadcast on television networks. Studies such as Animasawun (2016) and (Ikebude and Agunbiade, 2014) briefly mention this deportation episode.

The reported deportations were widely condemned as violations of human rights and the Nigerian Constitution, except by those aligned with the Lagos State Government. The provisions of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in section 41 stipulates that 'every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to move freely throughout Nigeria and to reside in any part thereof, and no citizen of Nigeria shall be expelled from Nigeria or refused entry thereby or exit therefrom' (Agbedo, 2020). In addition,

Section 42 of the Nigerian constitution states that a citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not: (a) be subjected to disabilities or restrictions to which citizens of Nigeria or other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religions or political opinions are not made subject to; or (b) be accorded any privilege or advantage that is not accorded to citizens of Nigeria or other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions. (Fourchard, 2015, p. 42).

Considering these constitutional stipulations, the acts of detaining and forcibly deporting people from Lagos to other parts of Nigeria by the state government amounted to restrictions

on those citizens, specifically their mobility. Nwakanma (2013) argues that the deportation contradicts the idea of shared national membership or ‘national belonging’ in a federal state and highlights the irony that Lagos State, by infringing on the constitutional rights of Nigerian citizens, undermines the very legal foundation on which its authority rests.

In response to the deportations, the Publicity Secretary of NJIKO IGBO, an Igbo group, Brady Chijioke Nwosu, condemned the actions of the Lagos State government, stating, as reported by Doki (2013), that they amounted to ‘...gross marginalization, oppression, provocation, injustice, and a flagrant violation of Ndigbo’s fundamental human rights to freedom of assembly, association, and movement’. Those deported were people from the Igbo ethnic group, and the state they were sent to is predominantly inhabited by Igbo people. This suggests that it was not only ‘destitutes’ or those said to have ‘nothing doing’ in Lagos who were removed to avoid constituting a ‘nuisance’ to ‘Lagosians’, but also individuals perceived to be from other ethnic groups, in this case, Igbo people.

Beyond the use of insecurity and the need to remove those who have ‘nothing doing in Lagos’ as a justification for the deportations, a key underlying factor was the classification of those deported as outsiders or members of the ‘out-group’ based on assumed ethnic identity. Expelling Nigerians from one part of the country to another denies their right to live anywhere in the federation and challenges national unity; by tying residency to ethnicity, the Lagos State government exposes citizens to discrimination and ethnic violence (Nwakanma, 2013).

It could be argued that while certain citizens were labelled as ‘destitutes’ by the political elite in Lagos State and deported to prevent them from becoming ‘nuisances’, others in comparable situations may have been allowed to stay because they were seen as part of the ‘in-group’, based on shared ethnic ties with those governing the state. Thus, it could be interpreted that the Lagos State government have used nativist narratives to enforce internal deportation as a form of mobility restriction, engaging in internal segregation based on ‘state of origin’, and guided by ethnic assumptions that privilege certain groups framed as needing protection from the ‘nuisances’ and ‘destitutes’.

This deportation exercise went to court. A Vanguard newspaper report published on 6 December 2014 stated that the Lagos State Government won the case (Vanguard Newspaper, 2014). According to the report, the plaintiffs, who had been deported to Anambra State, sued the Lagos State Government, the Attorney-General, and the Commissioner of Police, arguing that their deportation on the grounds of being ‘non-indigenes’ violated Sections 35, 41(1), and

42 of the Nigerian Constitution, as well as Articles 6, 12, 2, and 28 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights; thus, they also sought N2 billion in damages and a public apology.

In its affidavit, the Lagos State Government claimed the applicants were removed from the streets for begging and other related activities, not out of malice, and taken to a rehabilitation centre in Majidun, where they received vocational training and were reunited with their families three months after completing the programme (Vanguard, 2014). Justice Musa Kurya of the Federal High Court in Lagos ruled against the plaintiffs. The Justice noted that when affidavits conflict, courts typically rely on oral testimony; since only the Lagos State Government provided such testimony, the court based its decision on the available evidence (Vanguard, 2014).

Given the documented corruption within the Nigerian criminal justice system, particularly in Lagos State (see Das, 2018; Salihu and Gholami, 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising that the applicants lost a case involving clear allegations of constitutional and rights violations. Despite these deportations being exposed as unconstitutional and a violation of the constitutional and human rights of Nigerian citizens, the Lagos State Government has continued them with impunity. On 6 May 2024, without warning, it carried out another mass deportation.

2024 Deportations to Osun State

In a press release dated 6 May 2024, Mallam Olawale Rasheed, spokesperson to the Osun State Governor, stated that an investigation team set up by the governor confirmed reports that some individuals were being rounded up in various parts of Lagos and transported in buses to multiple drop-off points across Osun State (Osun State Government, 2024). These locations included Ilesa-Akure Express Junction (Breweries), Ilesa-Ibodi-Iginla to Ife Express Junction, Osun Ankara Express Junction, Imelu Express Junction, and Iperindo Express Junction (Osun State Government, 2024). The statement added that 'Governor Adeleke [of Osun state] expressed shock at the development, urging Governor Sanwoolu [of Lagos state] to look into the matter and put an end to it if the report is true'. *PM News Nigeria* and *Peoples Gazette* also confirmed that the deportation took place on that date (Ibeh, 2024; PM News Nigeria, 2024).

The press release may be read as a case of politicians playing to the gallery. The Osun State Government claimed its investigation confirmed the deportation of individuals to the state, but this expression of concern came only after *Sahara Reporters* had broken the story, suggesting a performative response. Simultaneously, the statement emphasised that both governors had spoken and that the Lagos governor denied ordering the deportation.

While the Lagos State Governor informed his Osun counterpart that he had no knowledge of the deportation exercise, the Lagos State Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Gbenga Omotoso, confirmed the action. In a report by *PM News Nigeria*, based on a press release issued by Omotoso, the following statement was made:

The Statewide exercise to free Lagos of visible security risks has continued after the arrest of some suspects under the Dolphin Estate bridge. The ceaseless influx of miscreants, beggars, and the destitute onto Lagos streets has raised fears of insecurity of lives and property. This is unacceptable. As part of the exercise, 450 miscreants were at the weekend rescued. Of the lot, 371 pleaded for assistance to relocate to their various states due to the hardship they are facing in Lagos; 79 have been absorbed into some government facilities for rehabilitation after showing signs of being unwell. The exercise will continue as part of the government's responsibility to keep our citizens safe and secure (PM News Nigeria, 2024).

According to the *PM News* report, perhaps out of the 450 people, '...some of the 371 rescued were relocated to Osun at their request'.

The report published on May 7th by the *Peoples Gazette* corroborated the *PM News* account, stating that the press release by the Lagos State Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Gbenga Omotoso, confirmed the state's action, adding that it was part of a statewide exercise to rid Lagos of 'visible security risks' (Ibeh, 2024).

According to the press release, to reduce insecurity, the Lagos State Government carried out an operation in which 450 individuals labelled as 'miscreants' were 'rescued'. Of these, 371 were deported, while 79 were reportedly cared for by the state government. This deportation suggests that state officials may be invoking nativist rhetoric around 'law and order' and 'insecurity' to legitimise their actions by framing those affected as threats to the people in the state. In this context, the Lagos State Commissioner for Information and Strategy engages in what Rumford (2012, p. 897) describes as 'borderwork'. Borderwork refers to the ways in which everyday individuals create and enforce borders or boundaries within a state's urban spaces (Rumford, 2012). 'The borders concerned are not necessarily those (at the edges) of the nation-state; they can be found at a range of sites throughout society: in towns and cities, in local neighbourhoods, in the countryside' (Rumford, 2012, 897). Here, however, this

borderwork is carried out not by ordinary people but by state officials acting within a federal system, targeting not non-Nigerians but fellow citizens of that same federation, Nigeria.

To engage in this borderwork, Lagos State officials may have relied on what Newth (2023, 167) calls ‘groupness’, using social categories to determine who is a native and who is an outsider. In this context, the distinction between ‘indigene’ and ‘non-indigene’ was based on constructs such as ‘state of origin’ and ‘ethnicity’. Although ‘destitution’ was cited as a justification for the arrest and deportation exercise, the fact that 79 out of the 450 individuals, also framed as ‘destitute’, were not deported suggests that the exercise may have operated not only along economic lines but also in ways that reflect ethnic and territorial exclusion, raising serious concerns about xenophobia and constitutional violations. According to Nwakanma (2013), tackling urban poverty in Lagos requires well-planned social programmes, not the deportation of the poor to other states, which only deepen class and ethnic divides.

It is important to acknowledge that, at times, the spread of informal settlements in urban areas in Nigeria has influenced some state governments to undertake acts of deportation. However, these settlements also reflect a broader failure of governance in the country (Emordi and Osiki, 2008; Olajide, Agunbiade and Bishi, 2018, p. 30). Despite being one of the world’s leading oil producers, Nigeria consistently ranks among countries with high poverty rates (see, Omenihu *et al.*, 2024). This contradiction underscores persistent governance challenges, particularly in leadership, which is weakened by corruption, elite self-interest, and neglect of the general populace (Osoba, 1996; Oluseye, 2024). Some argue that the direction of this leadership is shaped not only by complex domestic dynamics but also by external forces that contribute to the persistence of weak governance in Nigeria and, by extension, other African countries (Kehinde-Balogun, 2023; Moyo, 2024; Olumba, 2024b).

These governance failures some times manifest in state-level practices that undermine constitutional rights. When the 2024 deportation to Osun is viewed through the lens of nativism, much like the 2013 episode, it reflects a state policy aimed at restricting the mobility of Nigerian citizens. The sort of exercise when carried out by a constituent member of the federation, not only casts certain citizens as undesirable but also forcibly removes them from cities they wish to live in. This can be interpreted as a policy that discriminates against and penalises people for exercising their constitutional right to freedom of movement within a federal system.

These deportations, carried out with impunity, privilege some groups while marginalising others based on social constructs such as ethnicity and state of origin. They illustrate how state policies and resources are deployed to legitimise borderwork and enforce internal exclusion. Ultimately, this reveals a deeper challenge for Nigeria as a federal state. That challenges is the inability of its political and judicial institutions to ensure that constituent states uphold the rights of citizens and remain accountable to the constitution.

6. The Nativist Rhetoric of International Migration in Internal Migration Control

Within the international migration regime, borders are no longer confined to territorial frontiers but have been externalised (Rumford, 2006; Gaibazzi, 2020), extending even to embassies (Mattioli, 2012). This externalisation enables the exclusion of some groups of people through the protection of borders (Georgi and Schatral, 2012), a process legitimised, among other factors, by the securitisation of mobility (Hintjens, 2019), particularly for individuals from so-called Third World countries. This idea of restricting mobility and the movement of people has been criticised and described as a form of global apartheid (Georgi & Schatral, 2012). Migration controls are used to construct a system in which entry into certain regions is restricted, allowing access only to those who have been vetted. As Georgi and Schatral (2012, 211) observe, ‘This global apartheid is materialized in the institutions of migration and border controls, among them IOM’.

These migration controls are widely recognised as standard practices within the international migration regime. However, the cases described in the previous section illustrate how such controls are now mirrored in internal migration protocols. The state policy of deportation functions as a mechanism of segregation, targeting individuals labelled as ‘miscreants’ and ‘destitutes’, deemed unworthy of residing in Lagos and instead relocated to other parts of Nigeria.

Internal deportations in Nigeria by constituent state governments, such as Lagos State, suggest that much like the international mobility regime, often marked by exclusionary practices and described as a form of global apartheid (Georgi & Schatral, 2012, 211), internal migration governance also produces structured exclusion and discrimination. Deporting citizens from one part of the country to another can be seen as an apartheid-like practice that privileges some and marginalises others along ethnic or ‘state of origin’ lines.

The exclusionary logics underpinning these practices mirror those found in international migration control, where migrants and mobile populations are often framed discursively as rapists, criminals, or terrorists, narratives promoted not only by the media but also by political elites seeking to appeal to domestic audiences (see, Chouhy and Madero-Hernandez, 2020; Harraway and Wong, 2021). Similar discursive strategies are evident in the deportations conducted by Lagos State.

The frames used to describe those affected by the 2013 deportation included terms such as ‘nuisance’, ‘destitutes’, and individuals with ‘nothing doing’ in Lagos. These discursive logics were not only deployed to legitimise the deportation exercises but also to discredit those deported through what can be seen as dog-whistle tactics. Similar framing was used in the 2024 episode, where the government not only confirmed the deportation but further described the individuals as ‘miscreants’, ‘beggars’, and ‘destitutes’ who posed a threat to life and property. These individuals were presented as having been ‘rescued’ by the Lagos State Government before being deported.

Such framing does more than justify the arrest, detention, and deportation of these citizens; it also infantilises them and obscures the reality of their experience of being arrested, detained, and forcibly deported. These practices, common within the international migration regime, are not unique to Lagos State. While this paper focuses on Lagos, other states in Nigeria have also engaged in similar internal deportation exercises.

Within the international migration regime, racialisation is often used to distinguish those deemed part of the ‘in-group’, and thus worthy of protection, from the ‘out-group’, who are considered threats or undeserving and therefore subject to exclusion or removal to ‘where they came from’. These biases operate at both interpersonal and institutional levels. For instance, it can surface in interactions at embassies, border crossings, visa renewal offices, or in access to benefits and protections. They also can manifest structurally through practices such as *selective humanitarianism* (Korkut, 2016) or how policies like the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) are activated and implemented (Olumba, 2025). Such exclusionary practices are widespread within the international migration system.

Considering the two internal deportation episodes discussed, it could be argued that similar exclusionary logics are now being deployed within internal migration governance. These practices mirror those found in international migration regimes and serve as migration management tools. In addition, they also reflect deeper exclusionary ideologies rooted in

constructs such as ethnicity and belonging. They illustrate how state policy, public discourse, and notions of citizenship are mobilised to legitimise internal boundaries, borderwork, segregation, and human and constitutional rights violations. Acts of internal deportation in Nigeria increasingly mirror those conducted across international borders; this suggests a link between the exclusionary practices of the international migration regime and those shaping internal migration governance, practices that appear to be increasingly normalised through alignment with global migration control mechanisms. It is not suggested that such overlaps between internal and international migration dynamics are always present.

7. Conclusion

While the phenomenon of internal deportation in Nigeria has been criticised for its violations of human and constitutional rights and for its destabilising effects on social and cultural coexistence (Falana, 2013; Patrick, 2021; Ikebude, 2014; Nwakanma, 2013), this paper contributes to the discourse by analysing it through the lens of migration governance. The paper argued that the deportations are deployed as a state policy in several states in Nigeria, primarily to regulate internal mobility of certain groups. These actions are legitimised through exclusionary narratives, nativist logic, and security discourses, echoing frameworks typically associated with international migration control.

State officials frequently frame such policies as protective measures for perceived in-groups, while targeting and removing individuals categorised as outsiders based on ethnicity or 'state of origin'. Although poverty increases individuals' vulnerability to arrest and detention, it is social constructs, such as ethnicity and 'state of origin', that ultimately determine who is deported. These findings expose a structural weakness within Nigeria's federal system, especially how constituent states can act with relative impunity to violate fellow citizens' constitutional rights. This paper demonstrates that internal migration control is shaped by the same exclusionary logic that underpins international migration regimes.

The phenomenon of internal deportation in Nigeria represents a state policy that directly contradicts the core values of the constitution of Nigeria; whether such practices could endure in other federal systems in Africa or beyond remains uncertain. However, the persistence of this phenomenon in Nigeria highlights the urgent need for academic, legal, and policy engagement to ensure that the constitutional rights of all Nigerian citizens are upheld,

regardless of ethnicity or ‘state of origin’. Achieving that would promote inclusive and equitable internal mobility in Nigeria.

Wherever this practice is used to restrict mobility, whether in Lagos or other states, and framed as a security measure, a tool for urban management, or a welfare intervention, it does not justify the violation of constitutional provisions or the human rights of citizens. The poor should be accommodated, not deported.

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