

AI Securitisation and Youth Criminality in Africa: Comparative Frameworks, Ethical Risks, and Governance Responses

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Abstract

This article critically examines the securitisation of artificial intelligence (AI) and youth crime in Africa through a comparative, interdisciplinary lens. Using securitisation theory, the article explores how AI technologies and youth behaviour are increasingly portrayed as existential security threats, thereby justifying extraordinary policy actions. In the case of AI, the global conversation, especially as seen in China's use of AI surveillance in Xinjiang, shows how governments deploy advanced technologies under the guise of national security, often at the cost of privacy and civil liberties. At the same time, in regions like Nigeria, youth crime is depicted not just as a social or developmental issue but as a threat to state stability, especially concerning terrorist groups like Boko Haram. This perspective has resulted in militarised and punitive responses, such as mass detention and marginalisation of young people. Through a comparative analysis of the securitisation logic in both areas, the article highlights shared risks, including human rights abuses, discriminatory enforcement, and social exclusion. The study argues that although security concerns are valid, excessive reliance on securitisation shifts focus away from investing in structural and developmental solutions. The article concludes with policy recommendations that promote ethical AI governance, rights-based youth justice reforms, and increased attention to the root causes of insecurity, including poverty, exclusion, and poor governance. Ultimately, the article calls for a shift in security frameworks to incorporate principles of social justice, inclusivity, and human dignity.

Keywords: AI securitisation; human rights; security governance; youth criminality; surveillance technologies

Introduction

The convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and security policy represents a defining feature of contemporary governance. As states increasingly adopt AI technologies for purposes of surveillance, data analysis, and threat detection, concerns are mounting over the ethical and legal implications of these systems, particularly when applied to domestic populations. Simultaneously, youth criminality remains a persistent challenge across many African states, where a substantial proportion of the population is under the age of 25 and exposed to structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate access to education. Notably, in both domains, AI deployment and youth engagement, governments frequently invoke security narratives to justify coercive or exceptional measures. This article contends that the framing of both AI and youth criminality as security threats reflects a broader logic of securitisation, whereby issues are removed from ordinary political discourse and instead addressed through extraordinary means (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998).

In the field of AI governance, securitisation manifests through the rapid deployment of surveillance infrastructure, predictive policing systems, and national AI strategies centred on defence and internal security. A prominent example is China's implementation of AI surveillance in the Xinjiang region, where biometric and behavioural monitoring systems are used to track and detain ethnic minorities under the justification of counterterrorism (Crawford 2021; Feldstein 2019). These developments raise pressing questions about the balance between public safety and individual rights, as well as the global diffusion of authoritarian technologies.

In parallel, securitisation is increasingly evident in how African governments address youth criminality. While young people in the region face legitimate economic and social hardships, policy responses have often been punitive, associating youth with violent extremism, gang activity, or political dissent (UNODC 2018; United States Institute of Peace 2014). In Nigeria, for instance, the insurgency of Boko Haram has spurred the securitisation of youth populations, resulting in mass detentions, profiling, and counterterrorism operations that frequently bypass due process (Amnesty International 2021). This approach has not only undermined community trust in state institutions but has also weakened the prospects for long-term peace, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former combatants and at-risk youth.

The logic of securitisation in both AI and youth governance shares several common features. First, both involve a discursive shift from viewing a problem as developmental or social to one that constitutes a threat to state stability or national identity. Second, securitisation often results in the deployment of technological and coercive tools that disproportionately impact marginalised or vulnerable populations. Third, and most significantly, securitisation tends to suppress democratic oversight, legal safeguards, and human rights norms in the name of urgent action. While the framing of AI and youth behaviour as security issues may yield short-term tactical benefits, it can also produce significant ethical, legal, and social costs. These include the erosion of civil liberties,

the entrenchment of exclusionary practices, and the failure to address the root causes of insecurity.

This article argues that the securitisation of AI and youth criminality in Africa is not merely a rhetorical move but a governance strategy with far-reaching consequences. By examining how these two domains are framed, regulated, and operationalised through the language and practices of security, the article highlights the dangers of over-reliance on exceptionalist responses. In doing so, it calls for a recalibration of security governance—one that upholds human dignity, ensures accountability, and invests in inclusive and rights-based development.

The article proceeds through eight interlinked sections. The next section outlines the theoretical foundations of securitisation theory, drawing on the work of Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) to explain how states construct perceived threats and justify extraordinary measures. This conceptual framework provides the basis for understanding how both artificial intelligence and youth criminality are governed under security logics. The third section details the methodology, describing the comparative case study approach and justifying the selection of China and Nigeria as focal contexts. The fourth section presents the case of AI securitisation in China, with particular focus on the use of surveillance technologies in the Xinjiang region. This includes an examination of facial recognition systems, predictive policing, and state narratives of counterterrorism. The fifth section shifts to youth criminality in Nigeria, exploring how national and regional security responses to Boko Haram have resulted in the securitisation of youth populations, often through militarised and punitive means. The sixth section offers a comparative analysis, identifying commonalities and divergences in the deployment of securitisation in both cases, especially with regard to human rights, state accountability, and marginalisation. In the seventh section, the discussion situates these findings within broader debates about technology, governance, and justice, emphasising the ethical implications of treating social issues as security threats. The final section provides conclusions and recommendations, advocating for inclusive, rights-based approaches to AI governance and youth justice in Africa and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on securitisation theory to critically analyse how AI and youth criminality are framed and governed through security discourses. Securitisation, as developed by the Copenhagen School, most notably in the work of Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), offers a compelling analytical framework for understanding the shift of certain issues from the realm of normal politics to that of emergency and exceptional measures. This section outlines the origins, key concepts, and critiques of securitisation theory and applies these insights to the study of AI technologies and youth criminalisation, particularly in contexts marked by weak institutions, postcolonial state-building, and asymmetric power dynamics.

Origins and Core Tenets of Securitisation Theory

Securitisation theory emerged in the 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional security studies, which tended to focus narrowly on military threats and state actors. In contrast, the Copenhagen School proposed a broader, constructivist approach to security, emphasising that threats are not objective conditions but socially constructed through discourse (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). Central to this theory is the concept of the “speech act,” an authoritative declaration by a securitising actor (often a state or government official) that elevates an issue to the level of a security threat, thereby legitimising extraordinary action.

In the securitisation process, three key components are involved: (1) a referent object (the entity perceived to be threatened, e.g., national identity, state sovereignty, public safety); (2) a securitising actor (typically political elites or institutions that articulate the threat); and (3) an audience (the public or institutional actors who accept the threat framing and support extraordinary responses) (Balzacq 2005).

The success of securitisation depends on the audience’s acceptance of the threat claim, which then allows the securitising actor to operate outside the bounds of normal democratic oversight, often using force, surveillance, or emergency legislation. Importantly, securitisation does not necessarily correspond to an actual threat; it is the perception and discursive framing of a threat that matters (Stritzel 2007).

Securitisation of AI

In recent years, scholars have applied securitisation theory to the governance of emerging technologies, including AI. States are increasingly framing AI as both a tool and a target of national security policy. For example, AI is viewed as a strategic asset in geopolitical competition, particularly between global powers such as the United States, China, and Russia (Allen and Chan 2017). National strategies describe AI as essential to maintaining economic competitiveness, military superiority, and cyber-defence capabilities (Cave and ÓhÉigearthaigh 2018).

These narratives elevate AI development to the status of an existential race, where falling behind could expose a nation to economic collapse, warfare, or technological subjugation.

In authoritarian contexts, the securitisation of AI facilitates the deployment of surveillance infrastructures that are justified as necessary for counterterrorism and crime prevention. In China’s Xinjiang region, for instance, AI-driven facial recognition, biometric tracking, and behavioural prediction systems have been deployed to monitor the Uyghur Muslim population (Feldstein 2019). These technologies are supported by narratives that conflate ethnic identity with extremist risk, thus legitimising broad-based surveillance and detention policies. The securitisation of AI in this context operates not

only at the discursive level but also at the material level, embedded within algorithms, databases, and digital ecosystems (Crawford 2021).

Securitisation theory is thus useful in revealing how technologies are embedded within power structures and how technical systems are shaped by political agendas. By framing AI as both a means of and a response to security threats, governments can sidestep ethical debates, suppress dissent, and impose opaque forms of digital control.

Securitisation of Youth Criminality

Parallel to the securitisation of AI, the issue of youth criminality in Africa has been increasingly governed through security-centric approaches. While youth constitute a majority demographic in many African states, they are often portrayed as a threat to national stability, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected regions. Youth criminality is not merely treated as a symptom of social neglect but is reframed as a source of radicalisation, insurgency, or organised violence (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; United States Institute of Peace 2014).

This securitised framing is particularly evident in Nigeria, where the rise of Boko Haram has prompted heavy-handed state responses, including the military targeting of youth populations in the northeast. Young people, especially those from poor or marginalised communities, are frequently labelled as “potential terrorists” or “radicals-in-waiting.” As a result, counterterrorism policies have included mass arrests, preventive detention, and surveillance, often without due process (Amnesty International 2025). The underlying assumption is that youth, by virtue of their age and socio-economic vulnerability, are predisposed to criminality or extremism, an assumption that reinforces stereotypes and justifies punitive governance.

Securitisation theory helps explain how youth are transformed from citizens with rights into objects of suspicion, whose lives must be managed through discipline, containment, or militarisation. By viewing youth through the lens of threat rather than potential, states foreclose more constructive pathways of engagement, such as education, employment, and civic participation.

Critical Perspectives and Relevance to African Contexts

Despite its utility, securitisation theory has also faced criticism. Scholars have argued that its focus on discourse may neglect material conditions, institutional histories, and structural inequalities that shape security policy (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2009). In African contexts, where state legitimacy is often contested and historical legacies of colonial violence persist, securitisation does not always follow the formal script of Western liberal democracies. Rather, securitisation may emerge from informal practices, bureaucratic inertia, or donor-driven agendas (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011). Moreover, audiences may be fragmented, and securitising actors may not always

be the state; non-state actors, international organisations, and private technology firms also play critical roles.

Nonetheless, securitisation theory remains a powerful tool for analysing how governance through security logic marginalises certain populations and legitimises exceptional rule. It provides the conceptual language to trace how AI and youth behaviour are problematised, politicised, and governed in ways that concentrate power and displace accountability.

By applying this theory to two distinct but interrelated case studies, AI surveillance in China and youth criminality in Nigeria, this article demonstrates how securitisation operates across different domains, technologies, and populations. The framework enables a critical evaluation of the discursive justifications and practical consequences of security-driven governance, particularly in postcolonial and transitional settings.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine how the securitisation of AI and youth criminality is operationalised in two different but illustrative contexts: China (for AI securitisation) and Nigeria (for youth criminality). The comparative design is guided by the principle of *most different systems design*, in which two cases that differ significantly in governance systems, geography, and economic status are selected to reveal common logics of securitisation and their distinct manifestations (George and Bennett 2005). This method is particularly well-suited to exploring process-tracing, discursive constructions, and policy responses in complex sociopolitical environments.

Research Design and Rationale for Case Selection

The selection of China and Nigeria as case studies is driven by both theoretical relevance and empirical salience. China represents a paradigmatic case of technological securitisation, where the deployment of AI is explicitly linked to national security and social control. In contrast, Nigeria exemplifies the securitisation of youth criminality, particularly through counterterrorism responses to Boko Haram's recruitment of young people. Despite their differences, both countries exhibit state responses that prioritise security and control, often at the expense of rights, development, and inclusion. These cases provide fertile ground to analyse how securitisation unfolds in diverse geopolitical contexts but shares a similar logic of exceptionality (Agamben 2005).

This article does not aim to generalise findings to all AI or youth policies globally; rather, it seeks to produce context-specific insights that illuminate broader trends in security governance and the framing of vulnerable populations.

Data Sources and Collection

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and depth of analysis. These include:

- Policy documents: national AI development strategies, counterterrorism laws, national security white papers, and regulatory frameworks from China and Nigeria.
- Academic literature: peer-reviewed journal articles and books on securitisation theory, AI ethics, youth justice, and authoritarian governance (e.g., Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Crawford 2021; United States Institute of Peace 2014).
- Human rights and NGO reports: independent assessments by organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which document surveillance, profiling, and criminalisation practices.
- Media sources and investigative journalism: reputable outlets such as the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Reuters* have provided detailed reporting on state surveillance in Xinjiang and anti-terror operations in Nigeria.
- Public statements and official speeches: speeches and press releases by state officials, used as speech acts (as per securitisation theory) to analyse how threats are discursively framed.

These sources were collected between 2022 and 2024, with an emphasis on contemporary developments to capture the evolving nature of AI and security policy.

Analytical Framework

This research is anchored in constructivist epistemology, which posits that security threats are not inherent but constructed through language, symbols, and institutional practices (Balzacq 2005; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). As such, the analysis involved two primary stages:

1. Discourse analysis: Applying the concept of the *speech act*, this study examines how political leaders, government agencies, and media actors construct AI and youth behaviour as existential threats. Attention is paid to the language of urgency, criminality, and national survival.
2. Policy and practice analysis: Beyond discourse, this research explores how securitisation is embodied through legal frameworks, technological infrastructures, and policing practices. For example, in China, the implementation of the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) and facial recognition systems is analysed not only as technological tools but as instruments of securitisation (Feldstein 2019). In Nigeria, the use of detention centres, military raids, and youth profiling in the northeast is examined for its securitising logic.

By combining discursive and institutional analysis, the study aligns with Balzacq's (2011) call for a more sociologically grounded understanding of securitisation that considers context, audience, and policy impact.

Comparative Strategy

The comparative element of the study helps identify patterns across different types of securitisation. In China, securitisation is technology-driven and often integrated into the government's digital infrastructure, reflecting a long-term vision of algorithmic governance. In Nigeria, securitisation is actor-driven, relying heavily on law enforcement and military responses to perceived youth threats. However, both cases demonstrate:

1. The use of emergency measures (e.g., mass surveillance in China; military detention in Nigeria)
2. The targeting of marginalised populations (ethnic minorities in China; poor, urban, and rural youth in Nigeria)
3. The bypassing of accountability and legal norms in the name of national security

This cross-case comparison strengthens the claim that securitisation, despite local specificities, operates through recognisable global patterns.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, access to primary data, especially state documents and firsthand testimonies, is limited due to the authoritarian nature of governance in China and the conflict-affected context of northeastern Nigeria. As a result, the analysis relies heavily on secondary data and credible investigative sources. Second, the study does not employ quantitative methods or large-N data, focusing instead on depth and contextual analysis rather than generalisability. Lastly, while the study highlights patterns of securitisation, it does not fully explore resistance or counter-discourses, which could be explored in future research.

Case Study 1: AI Securitisation in China

China has emerged as a global leader in AI development and deployment, particularly in the realm of surveillance technologies. This growth has occurred in parallel with an intensified focus on national security, internal stability, and regime legitimacy. Nowhere is this more visible than in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where the Chinese government has implemented an expansive AI-driven surveillance infrastructure to monitor and control the local population, especially targeting Uyghur Muslims. This section analyses how AI technologies have been securitised in China through a combination of political discourse, state strategy, and technological architecture, transforming digital tools into mechanisms of social control and coercive governance.

Political Context and the Construction of Threat

Since the early 2000s, Beijing has framed incidents of unrest in Xinjiang, such as riots, protests, and isolated acts of violence, as part of a growing terrorist threat posed by the so-called “three evil forces” of separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism (Rodríguez-Merino 2022; State Council Information Office 2019).

This framing of Uyghur identity and Islamic religious expression as threats has facilitated a discursive securitisation, legitimising the need for exceptional measures. According to securitisation theory, the success of such framing depends on the capacity of the state to present the issue as beyond the scope of ordinary political debate and requiring extraordinary responses (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). In the case of Xinjiang, the Chinese state has successfully persuaded its domestic audience, through mass media, policy papers, and legal reforms, that heavy surveillance and re-education are necessary for maintaining national harmony and eliminating terrorism (Zenz 2019).

Technological Instruments of Control

The securitisation of AI is most visible in China’s technological ecosystem for surveillance and policing. In Xinjiang, the Chinese government has established a networked system of monitoring tools that includes the following:

1. Facial recognition systems: Deployed across public spaces, schools, mosques, and checkpoints, these systems use AI algorithms to identify individuals in real time and cross-reference their data with state databases (Feldstein 2019).
2. Biometric data collection: The authorities collect DNA samples, voiceprints, and iris scans as part of mandatory health checks, which are stored in centralised databases (Human Rights Watch 2017).
3. Predictive policing platforms: The IJOP, which was developed by state-owned and private tech firms, aggregates data from surveillance cameras, online activity, and personal records to identify individuals flagged as “suspicious” by predefined risk criteria (Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights et al. 2016).
4. Smartphone monitoring: Security agencies install applications on phones that scrape content, monitor location, and flag content deemed “politically sensitive” or “religiously radical.”

These technologies are embedded into daily life in Xinjiang, creating a pervasive panoptic regime where the act of being observed becomes a form of behavioural conditioning. Residents are aware that their movements, associations, and even facial expressions may be interpreted as indicators of dissent.

Importantly, the deployment of these technologies is not merely a technical exercise—it is undergirded by a security rationale that casts Uyghur behaviour and cultural

practices as inherently risky. AI tools are thus not neutral; they are configured to detect deviations from state-sanctioned norms and to facilitate pre-emptive interventions. The securitisation of AI in this context operates not only through speech but through code, algorithms, and infrastructure (Crawford 2021).

Institutional and Legal Justifications

The implementation of AI surveillance in Xinjiang has been supported by a legal and policy framework that explicitly connects technological governance to national security. Key documents include:

1. China's national intelligence law (2017): requires individuals and organisations to cooperate with intelligence-gathering operations and allows for extensive data collection for security purposes.
2. Counterterrorism law (2015): broadens the definition of terrorism to include vague notions of extremism, granting wide discretion to authorities in targeting individuals.
3. Social credit system pilot programmes: Although more commonly associated with economic behaviour, these systems are linked to law enforcement and influence mobility, access to services, and employment (Liang et al. 2018).

By embedding AI within legal frameworks that criminalise nonconformity and dissent, the Chinese state enhances the institutionalisation of securitisation. Rather than relying solely on ad hoc repression, the state creates predictable, codified systems for discrimination and control. These systems are difficult to contest, both legally and technologically, and are often presented to the public as scientific and objective, thereby masking their political intent.

Implications and International Concerns

The securitisation of AI in Xinjiang has drawn widespread international condemnation. Human rights organisations have described the system as a form of technologically enabled repression and “algorithmic authoritarianism” (Amnesty International 2025; Creemers 2020). Reports estimate that more than one million Uyghurs have been detained in so-called “vocational training centres,” which function as de facto internment camps. Detainees are often selected through automated risk assessments based on data harvested by AI systems (Zenz 2019).

Beyond Xinjiang, the AI securitisation model is being exported to other countries through China's Belt and Road Initiative and surveillance technology deals. Countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East have signed contracts with Chinese firms like Huawei and Hikvision to implement similar surveillance systems (Feldstein 2019). As a result, the norms and practices of AI securitisation may become globalised, reinforcing digital authoritarianism in regions with weak democratic institutions.

Furthermore, the proliferation of these technologies raises pressing ethical questions. Scholars have highlighted the risks of racial profiling, data abuse, and lack of algorithmic transparency, especially in contexts where minority rights are not constitutionally protected (Crawford 2021). AI systems trained on biased data sets—particularly those that equate religiosity or ethnic dress with terrorism—replicate and magnify systemic discrimination under the guise of technical efficiency.

Relevance to Securitisation Theory

The Chinese case reinforces and extends securitisation theory in several ways. First, it illustrates how securitisation can be achieved not only through speech acts but also through technological systems that embed security logics into everyday life. Second, it highlights the role of non-state actors, particularly tech companies, in facilitating state surveillance. Third, it challenges the notion that securitisation must be public or performative; in authoritarian regimes, securitisation may occur quietly, systemically, and infrastructurally (Baele, Balzacq, and Bourbeau 2020).

Thus, China's AI securitisation in Xinjiang exemplifies a shift from traditional forms of state security to a digital security paradigm, where governance is executed algorithmically and dissent is managed through data.

Case Study 2: Youth Criminality and Securitisation in Nigeria

Nigeria presents a compelling case of how youth criminality has been securitised within a broader context of political instability, economic disparity, and counterterrorism operations. With over 60% of its population under the age of 25, Nigeria faces significant demographic pressures alongside weak institutions, regional insurgencies, and high youth unemployment (National Bureau of Statistics 2023). In response, successive Nigerian governments have increasingly framed youth not just as victims of socioeconomic marginalisation but as potential threats to national security, particularly to violent extremism, gang activity, and cybercrime (Aghedo and Eke 2013). This case study analyses the securitisation of Nigerian youth through discourse, policy, and practice, especially in the context of the state's response to Boko Haram and related security operations in the northeast.

The Demographic Context and Structural Drivers

Nigeria's youth bulge—though potentially an asset—has become a source of political anxiety. Young people face limited opportunities for education, job creation, and political participation, making them vulnerable to radicalisation and criminal exploitation. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2018), over 34% of Nigerian youth are unemployed, with even higher rates in northern states like Borno and Yobe. These socio-economic grievances have been exploited by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, which began as a religious movement in the early

2000s but evolved into an insurgent group responsible for thousands of deaths and widespread displacement.

While many young Nigerians have been coerced into joining militant groups, others have turned to informal economies or criminal networks to survive. Yet rather than addressing these underlying conditions, the Nigerian state has responded by framing youth behaviours—especially in the north—as threats to national stability, thus inviting military and securitised interventions (United States Institute of Peace 2014).

Discursive Securitisation: Youth as Threat

The discursive securitisation of youth in Nigeria is evident in official rhetoric and policy documents that equate youthful behaviour with risk and deviance. Nigerian political leaders, military officials, and media outlets have frequently portrayed idle, unemployed, and religiously radicalised youth as the primary drivers of terrorism and societal breakdown. For example, government statements have referred to “restive youth” as a destabilising force and have blamed the persistence of Boko Haram on the susceptibility of youth to ideological manipulation (Adesoji 2011).

Such language functions as a speech act, in securitisation theory terms, that recasts the social issue of youth unemployment or radicalisation into an existential threat requiring extraordinary action (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). The referent object in this case is the Nigerian state itself—its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political legitimacy. Once youth are framed as a threat to these core values, repressive security responses become politically acceptable, even if they compromise civil liberties or human rights.

This narrative has also influenced international actors and donors, many of whom have aligned their funding and policy advice with counterterrorism logics, thereby reinforcing the securitised framing of youth (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011).

Material Practices: Policing and Military Operations

The Nigerian government’s counterterrorism strategy has relied heavily on military and paramilitary forces, especially in the northeast. Operations such as “Lafiya Dole” and “Safe Corridor” have involved the mass arrest and detention of young people suspected of Boko Haram affiliation—often without trial, due process, or clear evidence (Amnesty International 2025). Many of those detained are teenage boys and young men, some of whom were forcibly conscripted into militant groups or were merely living in insurgency-affected areas.

One prominent example is the Giwa Barracks detention centre in Maiduguri, where thousands of suspected youth militants have been held under conditions described by Human Rights Watch (2019) as inhumane and unlawful. In many cases, detainees are held indefinitely, without charges or access to legal representation. Children have also

been detained alongside adults, violating international standards on juvenile justice (UN Secretary-General 2024).

The use of mass surveillance, profiling, and military checkpoints in youth-populated neighbourhoods—especially in Maiduguri and Damaturu—further illustrates how the state monitors and regulates youthful presence as inherently suspicious. This aligns with the securitisation logic described by Balzacq (2005), in which security measures become routinised and embedded in governance practices.

From Victimhood to Criminality: Blurred Legal Categories

One of the consequences of youth securitisation in Nigeria is the blurring of victim–perpetrator boundaries. Many youths who have been abducted by Boko Haram, used as child soldiers, or subjected to gender-based violence are later prosecuted as terrorists or collaborators. For example, women and girls who were forcefully married to Boko Haram fighters have been detained under suspicion of voluntary association (International Crisis Group 2016).

This punitive approach undermines international legal norms that require the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers and victims of armed conflict (UN Secretary-General 2024). Instead of receiving psychosocial support, many young returnees face stigmatisation, surveillance, and re-arrest. This shift from victimhood to criminality reflects a deepening of the securitised lens, where even those harmed by violence are treated as latent threats.

Moreover, the 2015 Terrorism Prevention (Amendment) Act grants broad powers to security agencies to detain and prosecute individuals based on suspected affiliation, without necessarily establishing intent or participation in violence. This legal ambiguity enables the arbitrary treatment of youth and reinforces their vulnerability to state overreach.

Resistance and Counter-Narratives

Despite the dominance of securitised approaches, several civil society organisations, NGOs, and community leaders have pushed back against the criminalisation of youth. Organisations such as the Neem Foundation and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) have advocated for youth empowerment programmes, trauma counselling, and skills development as alternatives to militarised governance.

Additionally, former youth combatants have participated in peacebuilding efforts and community dialogues, challenging the stereotype of the violent African youth. These initiatives demonstrate that the security challenge posed by youth is not inherent but a reflection of unmet social and developmental needs.

Nevertheless, such efforts are often underfunded and marginalised in comparison to the robust support given to state security institutions. As a result, preventive and

rehabilitative approaches remain overshadowed by dominant counterinsurgency strategies that rely on force, suspicion, and exclusion.

Lessons for Securitisation Theory and African Governance

The Nigerian case contributes to securitisation theory by illustrating how the logic of exceptionalism is applied not only to abstract threats like terrorism but also to demographic groups such as youth. The state's framing of youth as both volatile and disposable reflects a governance strategy that prioritises control over inclusion. It also reveals how securitisation can be driven by postcolonial anxieties, elite fears of rebellion, and international pressure to comply with global counterterrorism norms (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006).

Moreover, the Nigerian example highlights the danger of self-fulfilling security narratives. When youth are systematically treated as threats, they are more likely to experience alienation, injustice, and recidivism—thus reinforcing the very conditions that securitisation seeks to manage.

Comparative Analysis: Cross-Case Insights from China and Nigeria

This comparative analysis synthesises the findings from the two case studies—AI securitisation in China and youth criminality securitisation in Nigeria—to illuminate the commonalities and divergences in how securitisation functions across different sociopolitical and technological contexts. Despite vast differences in political systems, technological capacity, and regional dynamics, both China and Nigeria demonstrate how the logic of securitisation is used to justify exceptional governance strategies targeting specific populations, be it ethnic minorities or youth. The comparative lens not only enriches the application of securitisation theory but also reveals how structural and discursive processes of security governance are globally diffused yet locally enacted.

Common Patterns of Securitisation

Discursive Framing of “Risk Populations”

In both cases, state actors construct “risk populations” through discourse, effectively transforming social, demographic, or political problems into security threats. In China, Uyghur Muslims are portrayed as inherently susceptible to extremism, and AI is presented as a necessary tool to manage the alleged risk. In Nigeria, unemployed or religiously active youth—especially in the north—are similarly framed as potential terrorists or criminal actors, inviting military-style interventions. In both contexts, securitising actors (e.g., political elites, military commanders, and government-aligned media) employ speech acts to produce a narrative of existential danger (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). The referent object—national unity, public order, or regime stability—is depicted as under threat, thereby legitimising the use of extraordinary tools and policies.

Institutionalisation of Security Responses

Both states have institutionalised their securitising practices through legal instruments, bureaucratic mechanisms, and technological systems. In China, the National Intelligence Law (2017) and Counterterrorism Law (2015) provide the legal scaffolding for surveillance and mass data collection. These laws enable the seamless integration of AI into state security operations. In Nigeria, the Terrorism Prevention (Amendment) Act (2015) and related military decrees authorise preventive detention, surveillance, and counterinsurgency operations, particularly in the northeast. These legal instruments embed securitisation into the rule of law, blurring the boundary between normal and exceptional governance (Agamben 2005).

Pre-emptive Logic and Predictive Control

Both regimes operationalise a pre-emptive logic: they act not just against overt threats, but against perceived future risks. In China, predictive policing platforms such as the IJOP identify individuals as “pre-criminals” based on AI-generated assessments of suspicious behaviour (Feldstein 2019). In Nigeria, pre-emptive detentions and youth profiling reflect similar anticipatory governance, albeit through more analogue methods. The anticipatory nature of these actions underscores a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive securitisation, where the mere potential for threat justifies coercion.

Targeting of Marginalised Populations

Another key commonality is the disproportionate impact on already marginalised groups. In China, surveillance systems are almost exclusively deployed in minority-dominated regions like Xinjiang, reinforcing ethnonational hierarchies and institutional discrimination (Zenz 2019). In Nigeria, youth in the north—who already suffer from underdevelopment and systemic neglect—bear the brunt of securitisation through arrest, detention, and stigmatisation. These practices raise fundamental questions about security for whom and at whose expense, as securitisation often reproduces or deepens existing social inequalities (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011).

Key Divergences in Securitisation Practice

Technological Sophistication vs. Militarised Tactics

One of the most striking contrasts lies in the means of securitisation. China relies heavily on digital surveillance, algorithmic profiling, and AI infrastructure. These methods are technologically advanced, pervasive, and often automated, allowing the state to monitor citizens with minimal visibility or resistance. In contrast, Nigeria’s approach is more militarised and physical, involving raids, checkpoints, mass detentions, and kinetic operations. While Nigeria has begun to adopt digital tools for surveillance, it lacks the infrastructural capacity and data integration mechanisms that China possesses. Thus, China exemplifies algorithmic securitisation, whereas Nigeria reflects conventional security governance rooted in police and military force.

Centralised vs. Fragmented Governance

China's authoritarian system enables centralised decision-making, allowing for the rapid implementation of security technologies with minimal bureaucratic friction. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controls both discourse and infrastructure, facilitating a seamless securitisation process. Nigeria, on the other hand, operates within a federal and democratic framework, albeit a fragile one, where security responsibilities are often shared or contested between federal and state governments, military forces, and non-state actors. This fragmentation leads to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory security responses, particularly in conflict zones (Adesoji 2011).

Public Legitimacy and Audience Reception

Securitisation theory emphasises the importance of audience reception. In China, the government has largely succeeded in framing AI surveillance as necessary for stability, and public dissent is heavily curtailed. In Nigeria, securitisation is often contested by civil society, human rights organisations, and affected communities, especially in cases of wrongful detention or extrajudicial killings (Amnesty International 2021). While both states engage in securitisation, the degree to which it is accepted or resisted varies, highlighting the importance of political culture and civic space.

Implications for Human Rights and Governance

Both cases raise significant human rights concerns. In China, AI securitisation has led to mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, and cultural repression, particularly in Xinjiang. In Nigeria, securitisation has resulted in the mass incarceration of youth, the erosion of due process, and the criminalisation of poverty and marginalisation. These outcomes underscore the risk of over-securitisation, where the state's preoccupation with control undermines democratic norms and social justice.

Furthermore, both contexts illustrate how securitisation can be self-reinforcing. By treating youth or ethnic minorities as threats, states perpetuate alienation, mistrust, and cycles of resistance, which then serve as further justification for securitisation. This feedback loop sustains a permanent state of emergency, where security logics dominate policymaking and development priorities are sidelined.

Theoretical Contributions

The comparative analysis of China and Nigeria contributes to securitisation theory in several ways. First, it extends the theory beyond liberal democracies, where much of the early Copenhagen School literature was focused, and applies it to authoritarian and postcolonial states. Second, it illustrates that securitisation operates not only through discursive acts but also through technological systems (in China) and militarised routines (in Nigeria). Third, it demonstrates how non-traditional threats—such as youth behaviour and AI—are securitised in the twenty-first century, expanding the range of

referent objects and actors. Fourth, it highlights the role of international norms, donor pressures, and global security architectures in shaping local securitisation practices.

By drawing these parallels and distinctions, the analysis enhances the explanatory power of securitisation theory while also critiquing its limitations, particularly its under-attention to materiality, race, and postcolonial dynamics (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2009).

Discussion and Policy Implications

The preceding comparative analysis of China's AI securitisation and Nigeria's youth criminality securitisation reveals shared global trends in contemporary security governance. Both cases reflect a growing reliance on pre-emptive, data-driven, and identity-targeted security frameworks, which redefine not just threats but also the very meaning of citizenship, inclusion, and state legitimacy. This section discusses the theoretical significance of these trends and offers policy recommendations aimed at balancing legitimate security concerns with democratic accountability, human rights, and developmental needs.

Redefining Security in the Digital Age

Traditional security paradigms focused on external military threats have been overtaken by domestic and digital security concerns, especially in the context of AI and demographic governance. In China, AI tools are deployed not only for counterterrorism but also for managing political dissent, religious expression, and cultural identity—an expansive approach that securitises normal civic behaviour. Nigeria, in contrast, securitises its youth population through a counterinsurgency lens, viewing them as potential insurgents or criminals rather than as socio-economically disenfranchised citizens in need of empowerment.

This broadening of the security domain reflects what Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) term “sectoral securitisation,” where non-military issues—like identity, technology, or development—are recast as national security imperatives. However, this shift risks normalising emergency governance, reducing space for democratic deliberation, and expanding state power beyond accountability.

The Risks of Algorithmic Authoritarianism and Militarised Youth Governance

One key insight from the Chinese case is the emergence of algorithmic authoritarianism—a governance model where AI systems, data surveillance, and predictive analytics underpin authoritarian control (Creemers 2020). The integration of biometric data, facial recognition, and behavioural profiling into the state's security apparatus enables real-time monitoring and pre-emptive detention, which are difficult to contest or audit. Such systems are presented as neutral and efficient, yet they often reproduce biases against marginalised populations.

In Nigeria, although the use of AI is limited, the militarisation of youth governance serves a similar function: regulating populations through suspicion and coercion. Both approaches raise serious ethical concerns. The profiling of entire communities—based on age, ethnicity, religion, or geography—violates the presumption of innocence, due process, and the principle of proportionality in law enforcement. Over time, these practices erode public trust and entrench social alienation, particularly among youth, who are systematically excluded from political participation and economic opportunity.

Securitisation as a Barrier to Development and Inclusion

In both China and Nigeria, the securitisation of minority groups or youth has diverted attention and resources away from inclusive development strategies. By framing certain populations as threats rather than as stakeholders in nation-building, governments forgo investments in education, employment, mental health, and community resilience—areas that are far more effective in preventing violence and radicalisation in the long term (UNDP 2018).

The Nigerian case is particularly illustrative. Military campaigns in the northeast have been accompanied by massive human rights abuses and displacement, yet they have not succeeded in eliminating Boko Haram. Similarly, China's AI repression in Xinjiang may deter open dissent, but at the cost of cultural repression and international backlash. In both cases, securitisation produces short-term compliance at the cost of long-term instability, especially when grievances are not addressed structurally.

Therefore, one of the key policy implications is the need to shift from punitive to preventive governance, where security is defined not merely as the absence of threats but as the presence of justice, equity, and opportunity.

Human Rights, Legal Safeguards, and Oversight

The normalisation of AI surveillance and emergency security measures demands robust legal safeguards and institutional oversight. In China, laws such as the National Intelligence Law and Counterterrorism Law grant expansive surveillance powers to state agencies with little transparency or judicial review. In Nigeria, counterterrorism laws allow for preventive detention and the prosecution of youth as terrorists, even when they are victims of coercion.

Both contexts illustrate the dangers of law being used to legitimise overreach. As Agamben (2005) warns, the state of exception becomes the rule in societies where legal instruments serve as tools of repression rather than protection. To mitigate these risks, both authoritarian and democratic states need independent courts, data protection laws, and civil society watchdogs that can scrutinise security policies and advocate for rights-based approaches.

Moreover, international human rights institutions and donors must resist the tendency to uncritically support securitised development, particularly in aid-dependent states like Nigeria. Conditionalities and human rights clauses should be integral to all security assistance and technology transfers.

Rethinking the Role of Technology and Youth Agency

It is crucial to de-romanticise the role of AI in modern governance. While AI can enhance security efficiency, it is not immune to political agendas, cultural biases, or misuse. As such, states and developers must embrace algorithmic transparency, accountability frameworks, and impact assessments to ensure that AI tools do not perpetuate discrimination or erode civil liberties (Crawford 2021).

Similarly, youth should not be seen merely as security liabilities, but as agents of change and partners in building resilient communities. In Nigeria, youth-led movements like #EndSARS have demonstrated the capacity for civic engagement and resistance against state overreach. Investing in youth education, skills development, and political participation is not just a developmental imperative—it is a security strategy grounded in inclusion rather than fear.

Towards a Balanced Security Paradigm

The central tension exposed by this study is between security and democracy, control and inclusion, technology and ethics. Neither China nor Nigeria has fully resolved this tension, though they manifest it in different ways. A balanced security paradigm must be grounded in the human security framework, which prioritises the safety, dignity, and rights of individuals over abstract notions of state sovereignty or regime stability.

Securitisation theory can benefit from engaging more deeply with postcolonial, feminist, and technological critiques, which question whose security is protected, at what cost, and by what means (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2009). Future research should focus on how securitisation is resisted, negotiated, or subverted by the very populations it targets.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the comparative analysis, several policy recommendations emerge:

1. Establish oversight mechanisms for AI deployment: Independent ethics boards, public audits, and judicial review mechanisms must accompany any use of AI for surveillance or security purposes.
2. Reform legal frameworks: Counterterrorism and intelligence laws must be revised to align with international human rights standards, including due process, data protection, and non-discrimination.

3. Invest in youth development: Governments must address the structural drivers of youth marginalisation, unemployment, poor education, and political exclusion, rather than defaulting to repression.
4. Promote regional and international norms on digital rights: African Union institutions, UN bodies, and bilateral donors should develop normative frameworks to regulate AI and surveillance technologies, particularly in fragile states.
5. Engage civil society and affected communities: Securitisation policies must be subjected to public debate, with meaningful input from civil society, local leaders, and the communities most impacted.

Conclusion

This article has explored the securitisation of AI and youth criminality through two illustrative case studies—China’s deployment of artificial intelligence technologies in the Xinjiang region and Nigeria’s militarised approach to youth criminality in the context of counterinsurgency operations. While divergent in political structure, technological capacity, and institutional configuration, both states reveal a shared trend: the increasing normalisation of securitisation as a mode of governance for managing perceived threats from marginalised or vulnerable populations. These cases offer important insights into the dynamics, consequences, and theoretical implications of securitisation in the twenty-first century.

Revisiting the Core Arguments

At the heart of both case studies lies a discursive and institutional logic in which the state defines certain populations—Uyghur Muslims in China, and unemployed or radicalised youth in Nigeria—as existential threats to national unity, social stability, or political legitimacy. This framing, consistent with Copenhagen School securitisation theory (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998), enables the state to take extraordinary measures outside the bounds of normal political processes, often with popular or institutional legitimacy.

In China, this securitisation is executed through technologically advanced means, including biometric surveillance, predictive policing, and integrated databases that monitor behaviour, association, and religious activity. In Nigeria, the state relies on more traditional instruments of coercion—military force, mass arrests, and detention without trial—but with similarly securitised logics and outcomes.

Importantly, both regimes justify their actions by appealing to national security and counterterrorism narratives, embedding their approaches within the broader international discourse on the “war on terror.” This global framework lends legitimacy to repressive practices while also enabling international cooperation, funding, and technology transfer, despite ongoing human rights violations.

Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, the comparative analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how securitisation operates across varied political regimes. It underscores that securitisation does not depend solely on liberal-democratic structures or public audiences. In authoritarian contexts like China, securitisation may be achieved through infrastructural and algorithmic means, while in fragile democracies like Nigeria, securitisation may rely on military narratives and legal ambiguity.

Moreover, this study engages with critiques of the Copenhagen School by emphasising materiality and embodied consequences. As Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2009) argue, securitisation theory must account for the racialised, gendered, and postcolonial dimensions of who gets securitised and how. In both China and Nigeria, securitisation disproportionately targets non-dominant populations—ethnic minorities, religious groups, and the youth—whose marginalisation is both a cause and effect of the security regime.

The article also broadens the referent object of security to include not just the state but the datafied self, the disaffected youth, and the algorithmically sorted citizen, who become both the subject and object of surveillance. This reorientation calls for a reconceptualisation of security in the age of AI, where the borders of the state extend into biometric databases, smartphone apps, and behavioural analytics (Crawford 2021).

Policy Relevance and Ethical Imperatives

The findings of this article raise profound ethical and policy questions. How can states protect citizens from violence without criminalising entire communities? How do societies balance the promise of technology with the perils of surveillance? And what forms of accountability and oversight are possible, especially in contexts where democratic institutions are weak or authoritarian?

Both China and Nigeria demonstrate the perils of over-securitisation: the erosion of civil liberties, the undermining of trust in state institutions, and the creation of cycles of exclusion, resistance, and repression. While the tools differ—from AI-driven facial recognition in China to military checkpoints in Nigeria—the outcomes are similar: fear, social fragmentation, and a weakening of democratic legitimacy.

To counter these trends, the article argues for a multi-level strategy that includes legal reform, technological accountability, youth empowerment, and international oversight. Regional and global institutions—such as the African Union, UN Special Rapporteurs, and transnational civil society coalitions—must play a more proactive role in scrutinising and regulating the spread of surveillance technologies and counterterrorism measures that disproportionately target vulnerable groups.

Future Directions for Research

While this article offers a comparative and theory-informed analysis, it also opens several avenues for further inquiry. First, more empirical research is needed on the lived experiences of securitised populations, especially how youth in Nigeria and ethnic minorities in China navigate, resist, or internalise their securitised identities. Ethnographic work, participatory research, and narrative analysis could enrich the current top-down approach.

Second, future research should explore the transnational dimensions of securitisation, including how Chinese AI firms export surveillance technologies to African states or how donor agencies shape security agendas through conditionalities and policy advice. This would help connect micro-level impacts to macro-level political economies.

Finally, scholars must continue to interrogate the role of tech companies and private security actors, who often operate at the intersection of profit and politics. As private firms develop and deploy surveillance tools, the boundary between state and market blurs, raising questions about accountability, transparency, and the commodification of security.

The securitisation of AI in China and youth criminality in Nigeria reveals a troubling convergence: states facing internal challenges increasingly turn to security logics to manage populations, rather than addressing root causes through development, dialogue, or inclusion. While the instruments differ—code in one case, coercion in another—the outcome is the same: a narrowing of civic space, a redefinition of citizenship, and a normalisation of emergency governance.

To reverse this trend, scholars, policymakers, and activists must work together to reclaim security as a human right, not a tool of exclusion. This requires resisting the allure of technological determinism, questioning the narratives that legitimise repression, and building governance systems rooted in transparency, participation, and justice.

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