

Undemocratic Democracy: Evaluating Nigeria's Democratic Journey Since 1999

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.2025.906000464>

Received: 18 June 2025; Accepted: 23 June 2025; Published: 23 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper critically evaluates Nigeria's democratic journey since its transition from military to civilian rule in 1999. Despite maintaining regular elections and a formal constitutional framework, democratic governance has failed to translate into substantive human development or inclusive growth. The study examines how systemic corruption, elite capture, institutional decay, and escalating insecurity have eroded the fundamental principles of democracy—accountability, participation, and public welfare. While Nigeria has recorded intermittent economic growth, this has remained exclusionary, with over 129 million people living in multidimensional poverty amid widening inequality and persistent unemployment. Weak governance structures and politicized institutions have enabled rent-seeking elites to dominate the political landscape, hollowing out electoral integrity and public trust. The proliferation of violent conflict, food insecurity, and internal displacement has further eroded state legitimacy and crippled key sectors such as agriculture. Declining voter turnout and political disengagement underscore a broader legitimacy crisis in a democracy increasingly devoid of substance. Through a multidimensional analysis—spanning economic, institutional, and security domains—the paper argues that Nigeria's democracy operates more as a mechanism of elite consolidation than as a vehicle for collective uplift. It concludes by advocating for a transformative reform agenda grounded in institutional accountability, citizen empowerment, and inclusive governance. Without such structural overhauls, Nigeria risks entrenching a performative democracy—democratic in appearance but undemocratic in practice.

Keywords: Procedural democracy, Substantive democracy, Elite capture, State fragility, Insecurity, Institutional failure, Developmental governance, Electoral legitimacy, Socioeconomic inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 was widely celebrated as a turning point—a moment of liberation from decades of military rule and authoritarian repression. The transition ushered in hope for accountable leadership, inclusive political participation, institutional reform, and sustained socio-economic development. It was expected that democratic governance would improve the lives of ordinary Nigerians, stabilize the polity, and unlock the country's vast economic potential. However, twenty-six years on, the optimism that greeted the transition has largely given way to disillusionment.

While Nigeria has maintained the outward structures of democracy—regular elections, formal institutions, and constitutional governance—its democratic experience since 1999 has been substantively undermined by systemic dysfunction and elite capture. What exists today is increasingly a democracy in form but not in substance—a system where political power circulates among a narrow ruling class while the vast majority of citizens remain economically disenfranchised, politically marginalized, and socially insecure. Despite episodic periods of economic growth and the country's considerable natural resource endowment, the vast majority of Nigerians have seen a slight improvement in their material conditions. Poverty has not only persisted but has become increasingly multidimensional, while economic performance remains volatile and structurally dependent on oil exports. Human development indicators remain among the lowest globally, reflecting chronic underinvestment in health, education, and social infrastructure. The persistent failure to translate economic potential into inclusive development has widened socio-economic disparities and deepened public discontent.

Problem Statement

The country's post-1999 democratic era has been marked by persistent macroeconomic volatility, increasing poverty, and widening inequality. Even during periods of economic expansion, the benefits have been unevenly distributed. Nigeria remains one of the most unequal societies in Africa, with more than 133 million people living in multidimensional poverty despite its immense natural resource wealth. As the African Development Bank (2024) notes, Nigeria continues to be a net food importer, spending an average of \$6.4 billion annually on food imports between 2010 and 2020—an indictment of its failure to convert economic potential into inclusive prosperity.

Public sector corruption has further entrenched this dysfunction. Institutions designed to safeguard democracy—such as the electoral commission, judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies—have been weakened by political interference and lack of accountability. Despite the proliferation of anti-corruption rhetoric and agencies, the Nigerian state remains structurally weak and vulnerable to rent-seeking, patronage politics, and impunity, fostering a culture of impunity and elite immunity. Corruption continues to undermine the rule of law, erode public trust, and compromise electoral integrity.

A defining paradox of Nigeria's democratic journey is the simultaneous deepening of insecurity and the erosion of state legitimacy. The escalation of violent conflicts—ranging from the Boko Haram insurgency and rural banditry to kidnapping, farmer-herder clashes, and extrajudicial killings by security forces—has rendered large parts of the country ungovernable and pushed millions into displacement and fear. Agriculture—the country's economic backbone—has suffered severe setbacks as farmers flee high-risk zones, contributing to rising food insecurity and economic precarity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2025) projects a 5% drop in paddy rice harvest due to insecurity, while National Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Services (NAERLS) reports that 2.1 million hectares of farmland are now inaccessible, particularly in Nigeria's maize-producing belt. These security crises have not only crippled agricultural productivity and displaced millions but deterred investment and exacerbated socio-economic fragility.

These cumulative failures—economic, institutional, and security-related—have deeply eroded public confidence in the democratic process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the alarming decline in voter turnout and political participation. From a turnout of 52.3% in 1999, participation fell to just 26.7% in the 2023 presidential elections—the lowest since the return to civilian rule, underscoring a deepening legitimacy crisis. The symbolism is clear: Nigeria's democracy is becoming increasingly disconnected from its citizens. Rather than a means for shaping governance, demanding accountability, and a mechanism for popular sovereignty, elections have become elite rituals disconnected from the lived realities of most Nigerians. The steady erosion of political engagement reflects not apathy but a rational withdrawal from a system perceived as incapable of delivering change.

Objectives of the Study

This paper interrogates the paradox of Nigeria's democratic experience—a system that promises accountability, inclusion and progress but has delivered exclusion, dysfunction and precarity. It evaluates the country's democratic trajectory since 1999 through five interrelated lenses:

- Economic performance and structural dysfunction,
- Human development and socio-economic exclusion,
- Public sector corruption and governance decay,
- Escalating insecurity and state fragility, and
- Declining voter turnout and political participation.

In tracing these interconnected crises, the paper explores how Nigeria's democracy has become increasingly undemocratic in practice—subordinated to elite interests, divorced from citizen welfare, and incapable of delivering basic public goods.

Significance of the Study

This study is both diagnostic and prescriptive. It sheds light on the structural and institutional pathologies that have rendered Nigeria's democratic experiment hollow and increasingly disconnected from its citizens. By tracing the interplay between political dysfunction, economic exclusion, and insecurity, the study offers a comprehensive account of Nigeria's post-1999 democratic crisis.

More importantly, it asks a forward-looking question: How can democracy be reimagined to work for all Nigerians? In seeking answers, the paper proposes pathways for institutional reform, inclusive governance, and citizen re-engagement necessary to salvage and deepen Nigeria's democratic experiment. Without urgent intervention, Nigeria risks sliding further into a façade democracy—an elaborate ritual that retains the form of democratic rule but none of its substance.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and documentary research methodology to evaluate Nigeria's democratic trajectory from 1999 to the present. The approach combines political analysis, institutional critique, and socio-economic assessment, drawing from both primary and secondary sources to interrogate the performance, contradictions, and outcomes of Nigeria's post-military democratic experiment. The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT for drafting assistance and language refinement to enhance the clarity of the manuscript. The AI tool was employed solely for improving readability and structuring sentences, without influencing the analytical, interpretative, or conceptual contributions of the study. All substantive content, analyses, and conclusions were independently developed by the author.

Research Design

The paper is structured thematically around five core dimensions:

- Economic performance and structural dysfunction
- Human development indicators and social exclusion
- Public sector corruption and governance challenges
- Insecurity and its impact on democratic stability
- Voter turnout and political participation trends

Each theme is examined through the lens of democratic theory and political economy, emphasizing the disjuncture between democratic expectations and lived realities in Nigeria.

Data Sources

The analysis relies on a wide array of documentary sources, including:

- **Official government publications and reports:** National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), National Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Services (NAERLS), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and Ministry of Finance reports.
- **International development agency data:** World Bank, African Development Bank (AfDB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
- **Peer-reviewed academic literature:** Relevant works on Nigerian governance, democracy, and development published in journals, working papers, and edited volumes.
- **Credible media reports and policy briefs:** Premium Times, The Guardian Nigeria, Ecofin Agency, Oxfam, and Statista are used to supplement official statistics with contextual reporting and civil society perspectives.
- **Voter turnout and electoral data:** Aggregated from INEC election records (1999–2023), verified by independent election monitoring organizations and scholarly databases.

Analytical Approach

The study employs critical content analysis to examine how democratic institutions and political actors have functioned over the past two and a half decades. Electoral outcomes, participation rates, governance performance, and socio-economic indicators are analyzed in relation to democratic theory, particularly the gap between procedural democracy (encompassing elections, institutions, and constitutions) and substantive democracy (encompassing accountability, equity, development, and citizen empowerment). This approach allows for a multi-layered analysis that connects macro-level political structures with micro-level socio-economic impacts, including poverty, insecurity, and voter apathy.

Limitations

While this research offers a comprehensive evaluation of Nigeria's democratic experience, it is constrained by the availability and reliability of official data, particularly in areas where statistics are politically sensitive or inconsistently recorded (e.g., corruption prosecutions, security incidents, and disaggregated poverty levels). Additionally, the study does not include fieldwork or survey data, focusing instead on desk-based analysis of secondary sources. Nevertheless, the triangulation of data from multiple reputable sources provides a robust foundation for critical inquiry and comparative insight.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a blend of democratic theory and political economy, providing a conceptual foundation to critically assess Nigeria's post-1999 democratic experience. It draws primarily on the distinction between procedural and substantive democracy, complemented by theories of elite capture, state fragility, and developmental governance.

Procedural vs. Substantive Democracy

A foundational lens for this study is the dichotomy between procedural and substantive democracy, as developed by theorists such as Robert Dahl (1971) and later expanded by Larry Diamond (1999) and Guillermo O'Donnell (2004). Procedural democracy emphasizes the formal mechanisms of democratic governance, including regular elections, constitutional frameworks, multi-party competition, and civil liberties. Substantive democracy, on the other hand, extends beyond electoral rituals to evaluate whether democratic governance achieves outcomes such as social justice, equity, accountability, and human development.

This framework is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where elections are routinely held, but the material conditions of the population continue to deteriorate. The study, therefore, assesses whether Nigeria's democracy has been merely procedural—characterized by the appearance of democratic norms—or substantively transformative.

Elite Capture and Democratic Hollowing

The concept of elite capture—the process by which political and economic elites manipulate institutions to serve their interests—is central to understanding Nigeria's democratic decline. Drawing from Acemoglu and Robinson's (2012) work on political inequality and institutional failure, the study explores how Nigeria's ruling class has subverted electoral and governance systems to entrench power, access state resources, and evade accountability. In this context, democracy becomes a tool of legitimization rather than a means of empowerment.

The phenomenon of "hollow democracy," as conceptualized by O'Donnell (2004) and Levitsky & Way (2010), also provides analytical leverage. These frameworks highlight how regimes may adopt the façade of democratic legitimacy (through elections and constitutions) while systematically undermining its core principles, such as accountability, the rule of law, and popular sovereignty.

State Fragility and Insecurity

The rise of violent non-state actors and the decline of state capacity in Nigeria necessitate a framework that

incorporates state fragility theory. According to the OECD (2018), fragile states are characterized by weak institutions, poor service delivery, and an inability to ensure security and the rule of law. In Nigeria, widespread insecurity—ranging from Boko Haram insurgency to farmer-herder conflicts—has not only disrupted development but also constrained political participation, especially in rural and marginalized regions.

This study employs this lens to assess how insecurity undermines the fundamental democratic precondition of citizen agency, rendering free and fair participation in public life increasingly challenging.

Developmental Governance and Political Economy

Ultimately, the analysis is informed by developmental governance theory, which examines how political institutions and policy choices impact economic outcomes and human welfare. Scholars such as Peter Evans (1995) and Mushtaq Khan (2010) argue that democratic governance must be judged not only by formal rules but also by its capacity to promote inclusive development. Nigeria's continued reliance on oil rents, inadequate public investment, and weak social protection systems indicate a failure of developmental governance under democratic rule.

This framework enables the study to evaluate democracy not as an abstract ideal but as a system of rule whose legitimacy depends on its ability to deliver socio-economic progress. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for interrogating Nigeria's democratic trajectory. They allow for a critical assessment of the gap between democratic expectations and lived realities between the rituals of elections and the substantive empowerment of citizens. By combining procedural-substantive distinctions with elite capture, state fragility, and developmental governance, the study situates Nigeria's democracy within a broader context of institutional failure, structural inequality, and political exclusion.

Economic performance and structural dysfunction

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in May 1999, the expectation was that democratic governance would facilitate inclusive economic growth and significantly reduce poverty. However, more than two decades later, Nigeria's socio-economic trajectory paints a grim picture of deepening poverty, macroeconomic volatility, and persistent structural underdevelopment. Despite substantial natural resource endowments and episodic periods of economic expansion, the vast majority of Nigerians have seen little improvement in their material conditions. In fact, poverty has become more widespread and multidimensional, reflecting a broader failure of democratic institutions to deliver socio-economic dividends.

As of 2023, the World Bank estimated that over 115 million Nigerians—approximately 51.1% of the population—lived in poverty, with this figure projected to rise to 129 million, or 56%, by 2024 (World Bank, 2024). These numbers point to a deepening crisis of economic exclusion and systemic neglect. Reinforcing this bleak outlook, the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) released by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported that 133 million people—63% of the population—are multi-dimensionally poor. This form of poverty extends beyond income, encompassing deprivations in healthcare, education, sanitation, housing, and employment (NBS, 2022). These statistics reflect not just economic hardship but a structural failure to secure human dignity and development for the majority of citizens.

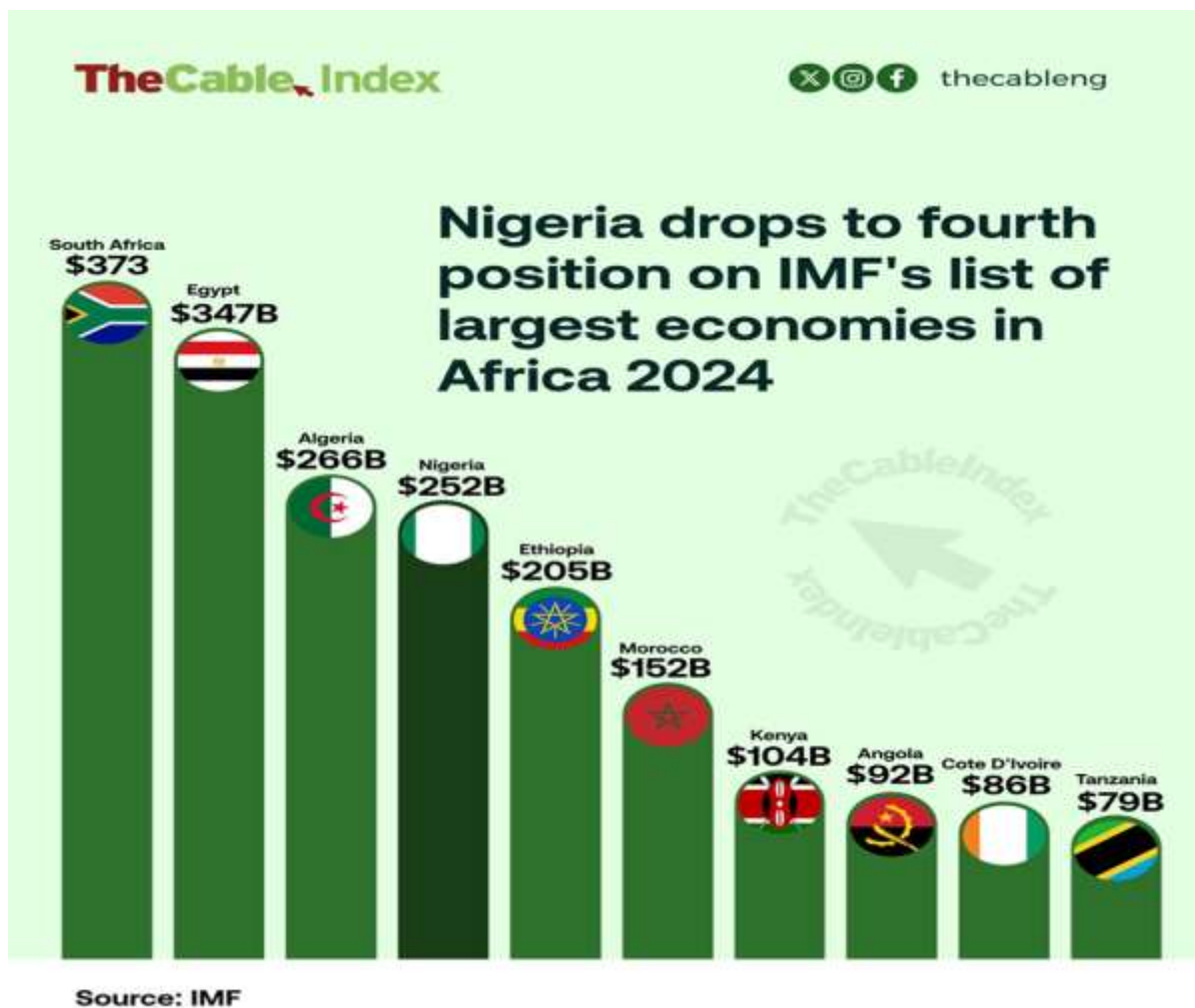
The spatial distribution of poverty highlights entrenched regional disparities. According to the MPI, poverty incidence varies dramatically—from 27% in Ondo State to a staggering 91% in Sokoto State—illustrating the uneven reach of public goods and services (NBS, 2022). Over 65% of Nigeria's poor reside in the Northern region, a testament to historical marginalization and the persistent failure of national development planning to redress interregional inequality. Child poverty presents an even more urgent concern: 67.5% of children under 17 are multi-dimensionally poor, and in rural areas, nearly 90% experience deprivation. Moreover, more than half of poor children lack access to intellectual stimulation which is essential for early cognitive and emotional development (UNICEF, 2023; NBS, 2022).

Gender disparities further compound the poverty landscape. As of 2022, approximately 88.4 million Nigerians were living in extreme poverty—defined as living on less than \$1.90 per day—with women making up nearly half of this population (Statista, 2024). The near parity between the 44.7 million men and 43.7 million women

in extreme poverty underscores systemic gender-based inequities in access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity.

The deterioration in living standards is also reflected in Nigeria's inflationary crisis. By February 2024, Nigeria's inflation rate had surged to a 28-year high of 34.6%, driven by structural factors such as fuel subsidy removal, currency devaluation, and supply chain disruptions (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The result has been a steep erosion of purchasing power, with an estimated 10 million people pushed into poverty between 2023 and 2024 alone (World Bank, 2024). Food insecurity has become endemic: between 2018 and 2020, over 21.4% of Nigerians experienced moderate or severe hunger (FAO, 2022), and this figure is likely to have risen amidst ongoing inflation and declining real incomes.

Nigeria's macroeconomic performance since 1999 tells a paradoxical story—one of statistical growth amid widespread socio-economic precarity. On paper, the economy expanded significantly, with nominal GDP rising from approximately \$57.5 billion in 1999 to around \$390 billion in 2023 (International Monetary Fund, 2023). GDP per capita increased from \$482 in 1999 to a peak of \$3,201 in 2014, only to plummet to \$1,621 by 2023, reflecting not only rapid population growth but also deepening structural vulnerabilities (World Bank, 2023). Yet this aggregate growth masked the absence of inclusive or transformative development. In 2024, Nigeria slid to fourth place among Africa's largest economies by GDP, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), after ranking first as recently as 2023. This dramatic fall—trailing behind Egypt, South Africa, and Algeria—was driven primarily by two sharp currency devaluations that erased over half of the country's GDP in dollar terms.



The Naira lost nearly 70 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar, undercutting Nigeria's macroeconomic standing and signaling a broader crisis of fiscal and monetary mismanagement. These trends highlight a deeper paradox: while Nigeria has experienced periods of high nominal growth, its economic model remains extractive, volatile, and insufficiently diversified, failing to deliver shared prosperity or sustained structural transformation.

A key driver of Nigeria's economic vulnerability is its dependence on crude oil, which accounts for more than 90% of the country's total export earnings and approximately half of government revenues (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020). Other analyses suggest government revenue dependence can be around 60% depending on market conditions (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023). Such mono-product dependence has left the economy exposed to global oil price shocks, resulting in frequent fiscal crises. Compounding this is the trend of deindustrialization: the manufacturing sector's contribution to GDP has declined from approximately 16.26% in 1999 to around 8% in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025a, 2025b). Instead of leveraging oil rents to develop productive sectors, successive governments have presided over widespread mismanagement, corruption, and policy incoherence.

One of the most visible manifestations of Nigeria's economic fragility is the chronic depreciation of its currency. From an exchange rate of approximately ₦90 to the U.S. dollar in 1999, the Naira had plunged to over ₦1,500 to the dollar on the parallel market in early 2024—a near total collapse of currency value (Premium Times, 2024). This depreciation has not only inflated the cost of imports but also undermined domestic production, exacerbating unemployment and social distress.

Unemployment, particularly among youth, has reached crisis levels. While overall unemployment stood at about 12% in 1999, applying the old NBS methodology, it surged to over 33% in Q4 2020, with youth unemployment estimated at over 50% (NBS, n.d). This demographic burden, combined with poor educational outcomes and limited job creation, has created a large class of disenfranchised young people, fuelling insecurity, migration, and social instability.

Debt sustainability is another major concern. Nigeria's debt-to-GDP ratio, which reached a low of approximately 7.3% in 2008 following significant debt relief, has since climbed to approximately 52.1% in 2024 (Proshare, 2025). While this ratio may appear moderate by global standards, the cost of debt servicing is alarmingly high, absorbing over 80% of government revenues in recent periods, a figure that has reached 90% at times in 2023 (BudgIT, 2025; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023). This fiscal squeeze limits the state's ability to invest in critical infrastructure, social services, and poverty alleviation programs.

These alarming statistics suggest that the democratic experiment in Nigeria while achieving electoral continuity, has failed to dismantle the political economy of exclusion inherited from the military era. Corruption, clientelism, weak institutions, and policy inconsistency have undermined the redistributive potential of democracy. Public investment has remained skewed, social safety nets are fragmented, and reforms have often been externally driven and poorly implemented (Oxfam, 2022).

The Nigerian case challenges liberal democratic assumptions that electoral democracy automatically translates to social development. Compounding this is the trend of deindustrialization: the manufacturing sector's contribution to GDP has declined from approximately 16.26% in 1999 to around 8% in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025a, 2025b).

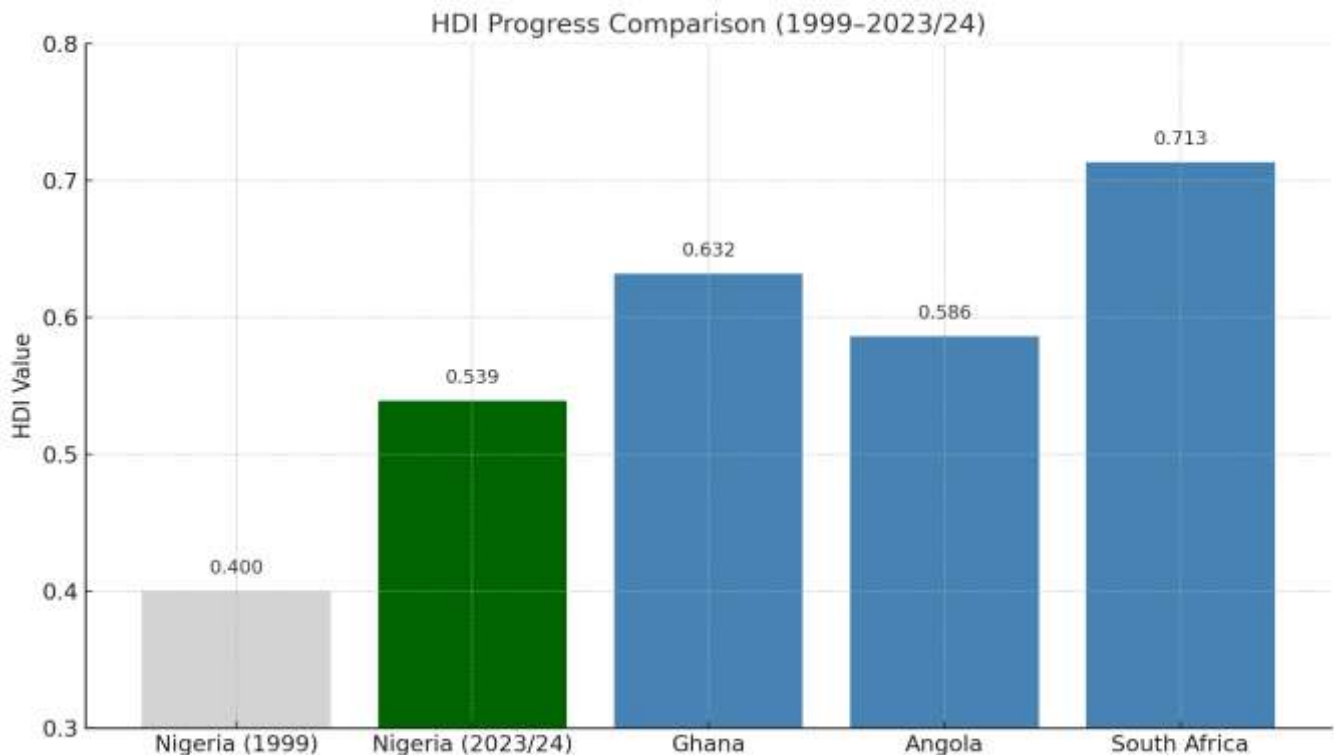
Human development and socio-economic exclusion

Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has made modest progress in specific human development indicators. The country's Human Development Index (HDI) rose from 0.400 in 1999 to 0.539 in 2021, yet it remains firmly within the "low human development" category. As of 2024, Nigeria ranks 156th out of 191 countries in the UNDP Human Development Report (UNDP, 2024a). This slow trajectory is underwhelming when viewed in light of the country's vast resource endowments, including over \$1 trillion in oil revenues generated since 1999.

Despite this resource wealth, Nigeria continues to underperform relative to peer and even post-conflict states. For example, South Africa (HDI: 0.713), Ghana (0.632), and war-affected Angola (0.586) all outpace Nigeria in core human development metrics (UNDP, 2024a). These contrasts underscore the extent to which systemic governance failures—rather than mere resource constraints—explain Nigeria's developmental stagnation. A disaggregated view of key HDI sub-indicators reinforces the limited dividends of Nigeria's democratic experiment:

Nigeria's Human Development Indicators (1999 vs. 2023/24)

Indicator	1999	2023/24	Peer Comparison	Analysis
HDI Value	0.400	0.539 (UNDP, 2024a)	Nigeria (0.539) < Angola (0.586) < Ghana (0.632) < S.A (0.713)	Slow, incremental progress. Still in “low human development” category.
Life Expectancy	46 years	55 years (World Bank, 2023)	Nigeria (55) < SSA avg (64)	Modest gains. High mortality and weak health infrastructure remain challenges.
Literacy Rate	~64%	~62% (UNESCO, 2024)	Nigeria (~62%) < Ghana (~80%) < S.A (~87%)	Decline reflects funding cuts, teacher strikes, and 20M out-of-school children.
Electricity Access	~40%	~55% (World Bank, 2024)	Nigeria (55%) < Kenya (75%) < S.A (84%)	Marginal gains. Rural energy poverty remains widespread.
Access to Clean Water	~54%	67% (World Bank, 2023)	Nigeria (67%) < Kenya (79%) < S.A (99%)	Gains uneven. Many communities still lack safe water.
Gender Inequality Rank	N/A	152nd of 170 (UNDP, 2024b)	Nigeria (152) < Ghana (121) < S.A (93)	Among the worst globally. Reflects entrenched gender disparities.
Maternal Mortality	>1,000/100K	1,047/100K (UNDP, 2024b)	Nigeria (1,047) > SSA avg (~545)	Alarming rate. Underscores poor maternal care and systemic neglect.



These metrics reveal a consistent pattern: Despite the formal trappings of democracy, the Nigerian state has failed to deliver substantive improvements in the well-being of the majority of its population. The literacy rate has declined due to poor public investment, dilapidated infrastructure, and policy instability—exacerbated by incessant strikes in the education sector and a growing population of out-of-school children, estimated at 20 million (UNESCO, 2024).

Likewise, life expectancy has increased only marginally—rising from 46 years in 1999 to 55 years in 2023—yet remains below the African average of 64 years (World Bank, 2023). High maternal and child mortality, poor health funding, and weak disease prevention mechanisms remain entrenched. Electricity access also lags far behind comparator countries: while Nigeria reaches only about 55% of its population, Kenya and South Africa cover 75% and 84%, respectively (World Bank, 2024).

Gender inequality compounds these failures. Nigeria ranks 152nd out of 170 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, with women holding just 4% of parliamentary seats—among the lowest globally (UNDP, 2024b). Women also face disproportionate barriers to health, education, and political participation, further entrenching multidimensional poverty and underdevelopment.

Inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI) metrics reveal that Nigeria loses 32.7% of its potential HDI value due to disparities in wealth, gender, and regional access (Maxinomics, n.d.). These losses are not incidental—they are the consequence of a state captured by elites, whose policy priorities often exclude large segments of the population.

In summary, the developmental record of Nigeria's democracy reflects a profound failure to transform formal political rights into socioeconomic rights. Patronage politics, elite rent-seeking, and systemic misgovernance have obstructed the institutionalization of accountability and inclusive development. As Sala-i-Martin and Subramanian (2003) warned over two decades ago, the "resource curse" is, in truth, a "governance curse"—and Nigeria remains a cautionary case.

Public Sector Corruption and Governance Decay

Despite Nigeria's transition from a military autocracy to a civilian-led democracy in 1999, the promise of accountable governance has been persistently subverted by endemic corruption in the public sector. Rather than curbing corruption and reinforcing democratic consolidation, the Fourth Republic has seen corruption evolve into a systemic feature of governance, weakening state capacity, distorting policy priorities, and entrenching inequality. Public corruption in Nigeria functions not merely as an episodic aberration but as a structurally embedded mechanism through which power is acquired, maintained, and exercised—a phenomenon that Laurence Schlesinger (2006) terms "kleptocratic democracy."

Although successive governments have created anti-corruption institutions—most notably the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC)—these bodies have struggled to operate independently or achieve meaningful convictions. According to Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria ranks 145th out of 180 countries, reflecting a regression from its position in 1999. This deterioration highlights the paradox of Nigeria's democracy: while elections are regularly conducted, governance remains characterized by elite capture and bureaucratic predation (Transparency International, 2023). This regression suggests that democratic governance has failed to dismantle corrupt networks, instead enabling their expansion and perpetuation.

High-profile corruption scandals have become emblematic of each successive administration in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999, highlighting the systemic entrenchment of elite graft. Rather than serving as aberrations, these scandals reveal a recurring pattern of fiscal malfeasance, political impunity, and institutional complicity. During the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, the 2012 fuel subsidy scandal exposed the embezzlement of over \$10 billion through fraudulent subsidy claims (Human Rights Watch, 2013). A legislative probe revealed that public officials and politically connected oil marketers colluded to siphon funds meant to cushion domestic fuel prices—turning a nominally pro-poor policy into a vehicle for state capture. Despite public outrage and mass protests, prosecutions were limited and convictions scarce, underscoring the limited deterrent power of Nigeria's anti-corruption architecture.

There was also the "Dasukigate" or "arms deal scandal," a \$2.1 billion arms procurement scandal originating from the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), which was allegedly diverted during the Goodluck Jonathan administration. Funds earmarked for military equipment to combat insurgency were diverted into campaign financing and private accounts, undermining both national security and the credibility of the

government's anti-corruption efforts (EFCC, 2020).

Simultaneously, efforts to recover stolen assets, such as the repatriation of over \$5 billion looted by former military dictator General Sani Abacha, have been marred by poor transparency and questionable reallocation of funds. Although international cooperation has facilitated the return of these funds, domestic accountability mechanisms remain weak, raising concerns over re-looting and misuse (Le Billon, 2014).

Judicial complicity and political interference further compound the challenge. While a handful of high-profile convictions have occurred—such as those of former governors Joshua Dariye and Jolly Nyame—both were controversially pardoned in 2022, eroding public faith in the judiciary and reinforcing a culture of impunity (Premium Times, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Such episodes reveal how the justice system is often weaponized or circumvented, depending on prevailing political calculations.

Collectively, these scandals do not merely reflect isolated incidents but rather a pattern of institutional decay that has hollowed out the Nigerian state. They reveal how democratic structures, when devoid of accountability and transparency, can facilitate rather than constrain corruption.

These patterns are not merely administrative failures but reflect deep-rooted structural weaknesses in Nigeria's democratic architecture. First, the institutional autonomy of anti-corruption agencies is routinely compromised by political interference. The EFCC and ICPC have been used selectively to target political opponents while shielding allies of the ruling party—a trend that has rendered anti-graft prosecutions suspect and partisan. Critics argue that the timing and targets of investigations often align with political motives, particularly during election cycles or when individuals switch political allegiances. This perceived selectivity undermines the public's trust in their impartiality. Many former governors indicted for corruption—such as Orji Uzor Kalu and Joshua Dariye—have not only avoided sustained imprisonment but have returned to prominent political roles, often protected by strategic defections or presidential pardons (Premium Times, 2022).

Second, judicial complicity has undermined public confidence in the rule of law. While courts occasionally convict public officials, the appellate process is frequently manipulated to delay or overturn judgments. In many cases, corruption trials drag on for years without resolution, allowing the accused to re-enter politics with impunity. The Nigerian Bar Association has itself acknowledged the judiciary's vulnerability to bribery and intimidation. The NBA (under various leaderships) made public statements and submitted memoranda addressing these issues. More recently, in 2023, the NBA President acknowledged ongoing challenges with judicial corruption and urged judicial officers to resist temptations. The vulnerability of the judiciary to bribery and intimidation raises urgent concerns about the erosion of judicial independence.

These dynamics generate what political scientists describe as a "predatory state" (Bayart, Ellis & Hibou, 1999)—a state that is captured and deployed by elites for personal and factional gain. In such a system, public service becomes a means of wealth accumulation, clientelism, and the fostering of the private interests of elites rather than a platform for collective development and serving the public good. Consequently, budgetary allocations are routinely inflated or misappropriated, service delivery deteriorates, and public trust in governance collapses. For instance, a pattern of unaccounted constituency project funds illustrates how corruption undermines even the most basic legislative accountability mechanisms. Constituency projects—intended to promote equitable development through localized interventions—have been persistently undermined by systemic corruption and weak oversight.

A comprehensive analysis by BudgIT (2021) revealed that between 2015 and 2020, over ₦229 billion was allocated to federal constituency projects across Nigeria; however, a significant portion of these funds remained unaccounted for. The report documented widespread issues, including project duplication, abandonment, inflated budgets, and poor implementation standards. Corroborating investigations revealed that as of 2019, over 60% of constituency projects tracked had either been poorly executed or abandoned altogether (The Nation, 2019). A 2016 BusinessDay analysis similarly found that only 33% of 2015 projects were completed nationwide. In a 2019 follow-up, Nairametrics reported that just 31.7% of constituency projects funded that year reached completion. These findings highlight persistent challenges in accountability and transparency, suggesting that legislative allocations—rather than serving public needs—have often functioned as vehicles for rent-seeking,

political patronage, and elite capture.

More recently, outrage has emerged over the ₦6.9 trillion allocated for constituency projects in Nigeria's 2025 budget. Policy experts describe this allocation as economically wasteful, politically motivated, and severely lacking in transparency. BudgIT specifically uncovered 11,122 projects valued at ₦6.93 trillion that the National Assembly inserted into the 2025 Federal Government Budget. Their analysis further revealed that 238 projects, each exceeding ₦5 billion, totaling ₦2.29 trillion, were inserted without adequate justification. This alarming pattern underscores persistent concerns about the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability mechanisms surrounding constituency projects, leading to calls for significant reforms in the budgeting process, a Supreme Court ruling on legislative appropriation powers, and investigations by anti-graft agencies (BusinessDay NG, 2025).

The cumulative effect of public sector corruption has been the stagnation of Nigeria's human development indicators despite its immense resource endowment. Between 1999 and 2024, Nigeria accrued over \$1 trillion in oil export revenues. However, this immense windfall has translated into minimal gains for the majority of its population. Moreover, public corruption has contributed to a growing legitimacy crisis in Nigeria's democracy. A Round 9 survey conducted in March 2022 by Afrobarometer (2022) reveals that nearly 70% of Nigerians believe most or all public officials are corrupt, and 77% are dissatisfied with how democracy works in the country. Specifically, 70% of respondents said "most" or "all" police officials are involved in corruption. Other public institutions also faced high perceptions of corruption: Parliament (65%), the Presidency (62%), local government councilors (55%), tax officials (55%), and judges and magistrates (54%) (Afrobarometer, 2023a; Afrobarometer, 2023b). This pervasive disillusionment breeds voter apathy, fuels populist sentiment, and paves the way for authoritarian nostalgia. In effect, corruption erodes not only the material foundations of the state but also the normative foundations of democratic legitimacy.

Escalating insecurity and state fragility

Since the return to democracy, Nigeria has made commendable progress in establishing democratic institutions, including a vibrant civil society and multiple electoral cycles. Despite Nigeria's return to democratic rule in May 1999, the promise of peace, stability, and prosperity has been persistently undermined by widespread insecurity. The democratic gains have been severely threatened by escalating insecurity, manifesting in terrorism, organized crime, communal violence, and institutionalized police brutality. From the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast to communal violence and banditry in the North Central and Northwest and systemic police brutality nationwide, the landscape of Nigeria's internal security has deteriorated sharply. This section examines the dimensions of insecurity, its causes, and its devastating implications for Nigeria's democratic health, economic development, and electoral integrity.

The Dimensions of Insecurity

Boko Haram and Insurgency in the Northeast

Boko Haram, founded in 2002, began a full-scale insurgency in 2009, displacing millions and destabilizing Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. The group's violent campaign has resulted in the displacement of more than 3.7 million people by 2023 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), (2024)). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) estimated that over 350,000 deaths—both direct and indirect—have occurred due to the conflict. The insurgency has crippled key sectors such as agriculture, education, and healthcare, further entrenching poverty and regional instability. In the 2019 and 2023 elections, insecurity prevented many Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from participating in the electoral process, contributing to democratic exclusion (Premium Times, 2023).

The Northeast insurgency reveals the democratic paradox of militarized responses. While Amnesty International (2020) documented numerous human rights abuses by Nigerian security forces, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings, the government's continued reliance on these same forces for counterterrorism creates a legitimacy crisis that undermines transitional justice efforts. These actions erode the legitimacy of state institutions and undermine public trust in democratic processes and transitional justice mechanisms.

Banditry and Kidnapping in the Northwest and North Central

Banditry has become endemic across Kaduna, Zamfara, Niger, and Katsina states. Between 2011 and 2021, over 10,366 deaths were attributed to banditry and organized criminality (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED], 2022). Mass abductions—such as the infamous kidnappings of 276 schoolgirls from Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok (2014), 300 schoolboys from Government Science Secondary School, Kankara (2020), and 121 students of Bethel Baptist High School, Kaduna (2021)—have tragically normalized school-related violence. Human Rights Watch (2024) reports on the pervasive issue of school kidnappings in Nigeria and notes that over 1,600 children have been abducted or kidnapped across northern Nigeria since 2014, citing data from Save the Children.

This security vacuum has had profound socioeconomic consequences. Organized gangs operating from ungoverned forests have proliferated, engaging in cattle rustling, turning kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery into a lucrative enterprise, and discouraging investment and farming (International Crisis Group, 2020). Nigeria's agrarian economy is facing a profound crisis as widespread insecurity continues to displace farmers and disrupt agricultural production. Across rural communities, farmers are abandoning their lands out of fear—primarily due to escalating violence, kidnappings, and farmer-herder conflicts. This has led to significant drops in local food production, pushing food inflation upward and increasing the country's dependence on food imports. The ripple effects have strained an already fragile economy and weakened investor confidence, with many businesses citing security concerns—particularly the risk of kidnapping—as a key reason for divestment.

According to a recent report by the National Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Services (NAERLS), cited in an Ecofin Agency article (2025), the situation has deteriorated dramatically. Between 2022 and 2024 alone, farmer-herder clashes were reported in 31 states, kidnappings in 10 states, and crop theft in 20 states. Rural banditry and livestock theft further compound the threat to agricultural livelihoods. The report highlights that approximately 2.1 million hectares of farmland in northern Nigeria are now inaccessible due to security threats. Niger State is the most severely affected, with 350,000 hectares abandoned, followed by Zamfara (323,000 hectares), Borno (300,000 hectares), Katsina (210,000 hectares), and Benue (200,000 hectares). Many of these once-productive areas are now classified as high-risk zones, making it increasingly difficult for farmers to access inputs, reach markets, or receive agricultural support (Ecofin Agency, 2025).

The impact on national food security is particularly alarming. Nigeria's maize belt—which includes Borno, Niger, Plateau, Katsina, Gombe, Bauchi, Kogi, Kaduna, Oyo, and Taraba—produces nearly 44% of the country's total maize output. Yet nearly half of the country's abandoned farmland lies within this critical region. Consequently, crop yields are expected to decline. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently projected that Nigeria's paddy rice harvest will drop by 5%, down to 7.9 million tons in the 2025–2026 season, due to reduced cultivation in these insecure zones (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025).

These recent developments have exacerbated Nigeria's long-standing structural weakness in food production. The African Development Bank (2024) notes that despite Nigeria's favorable climate and substantial arable land, the country remains a net food importer. Between 2010 and 2020, Nigeria's annual food import bill averaged \$6.4 billion, while food exports brought in just \$1.2 billion. This imbalance underscores the persistent vulnerability of Nigeria's food system—an issue now intensified by insecurity-induced disruptions to farming and rural livelihoods.

The convergence of insecurity, weakened food systems, and economic instability presents a serious threat to national stability. Without urgent and coordinated interventions—ranging from restoring rural security to improving agricultural resilience—Nigeria risks deeper food crises and further erosion of public trust in the state's ability to deliver basic welfare.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Benue and Plateau States

Recurring clashes between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers—especially in Benue and Plateau states—are among Nigeria's deadliest communal conflicts. Amnesty International's (2018) report, which revealed how government refusal to investigate, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators of attacks fuels impunity, estimated that over 3,600 people were killed in these clashes between January 2016 and October 2018, 57 percent

of them in 2018 alone. By 2023, the Benue State Emergency Management Agency reported that more than 2 million people had been internally displaced due to the violence (Businessday NG., 2023).

Although often framed as ethno-religious, the root causes include competition over land, water, and desertification, as well as weak conflict mediation frameworks. The Nigerian state's inconsistent response has worsened the situation. Amnesty International (2020) documents instances where security forces were accused of either inaction or bias, particularly during the 2019 Plateau State clashes. This selective enforcement erodes trust in state institutions and undermines the government's role as a neutral arbiter—a key pillar of democratic governance.

Police Brutality and the #EndSARS Movement

State security forces have transitioned from democracy protectors to democratic liabilities. Systemic police violence remains a profound threat to Nigeria's democratic project. The #EndSARS protests in October 2020 revealed deeply entrenched patterns of brutality, extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, extortion, and impunity within the Nigerian Police Force. Prior to the #EndSARS protests, Amnesty International documented over 82 cases of abuses and extrajudicial killings by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) between January 2017 and May 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020). During the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, the organization further documented unlawful killings, including at the infamous Lekki Toll Gate, where soldiers allegedly opened fire on peaceful demonstrators, resulting in at least 12 deaths at Lekki and Alausa and at least 56 deaths nationwide (Amnesty International, 2020a, 2020b).

These events laid bare the contradictions of Nigeria's democracy. State forces tasked with upholding citizens' rights have become agents of repression. Amnesty (2020) highlights 142 instances of rent-seeking checkpoints, weaponized arrests targeting young, tech-savvy Nigerians, and systemic extrajudicial killings—especially in urban centers such as Lagos, where it averaged three weekly pre-2020. The report also detailed how SARS officers set up illegal checkpoints, extorted money, subjected people to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, and carried out extrajudicial executions. This pattern of repression creates a climate of fear that fundamentally undermines two core democratic principles: the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. The lack of accountability for security agents exacerbates grievances, fueling cycles of violence and weakening democratic legitimacy. The consequence is that this "institutionalized predation" has chilled civic engagement and eroded public faith in both law enforcement and the electoral process.

Declining voter turnout and political participation

Voter turnout in Nigeria has experienced a dramatic and sustained decline over the past two and a half decades, raising urgent questions about the legitimacy and inclusiveness of its democratic system. While democratic transitions typically lead to expanded political participation, Nigeria's experience reveals a contrary pattern. Electoral engagement has consistently diminished, revealing growing disillusionment with the democratic process. At the onset of the Fourth Republic, public enthusiasm for democratic governance was high, reflected in a turnout of 52.3% during the 1999 presidential elections. By 2003, turnout had risen to 69.1%, the highest in Nigeria's democratic era, and remained above 50% through 2011. Voter participation peaked at 69.1% in 2003 and remained above 50% through 2011. However, a steep downward trend followed: turnout dropped to 43.7% in 2015, 34.8% in 2019, and reached a historic low of 26.7% in the 2023 presidential election—the lowest since the return to civilian rule (The Guardian, 2023). The 2023 presidential election marked a critical turning point, with only 24,965,218 voters participating out of over 93 million registered voters, raising fundamental questions about the representative legitimacy of elected officials.

Presidential Election Turnout in Nigeria (1999–2023)

Year	Winner (Party)	Winner Votes Received	Total Votes Cast	Registered Voters	Turnout (%)
1999	Olusegun Obasanjo (PDP)	18,738,154	30,280,052	57,938,945	52.30%
2003	Olusegun Obasanjo (PDP)	24,456,140	42,018,735	60,823,022	69.10%

Year	Winner (Party)	Winner Votes Received	Total Votes Cast	Registered Voters	Turnout (%)
2007	Umaru Yar'Adua (PDP)	24,638,063	35,397,517	61,567,036	57.50%
2011	Goodluck Jonathan (PDP)	22,495,187	39,469,484	73,528,040	53.70%
2015	Muhammadu Buhari (APC)	15,424,921	29,432,083	67,422,005	43.60%
2019	Muhammadu Buhari (APC)	15,191,847	28,614,190	82,344,107	34.75%
2023	Bola Tinubu (APC)	8,794,726	24,965,218	93,469,008	26.71%

This decline signals a crisis of democratic legitimacy. The fact that only one in four registered voters participated in the 2023 election raises serious concerns about citizen disaffection, representation, and trust in democratic institutions.

Explaining the Decline: Structural and Contextual Drivers

Escalating Insecurity: Democracy Under Siege

Insecurity has become a defining feature of Nigeria's political landscape, with a significant impact on electoral participation. In 2023, over 400 polling units in the Northeast were reported to be non-functional due to Boko Haram-related violence and ongoing insurgency (Channels Television, 2023). In states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna, voters stayed home out of fear of abductions, attacks, or communal violence. The farmer-herder crisis and displacement of rural populations have further hindered registration and voting logistics. Additionally, the legacy of extrajudicial killings—such as those exposed during the #EndSARS movement—has deepened public distrust in state institutions.

Systemic Corruption and Elite Capture: A Crisis of Faith

Rampant electoral fraud, vote-buying, and judicial complicity have led many citizens to conclude that elections are predetermined or meaningless. According to Yiaga Africa (2023), widespread vote trading and manipulation during the 2023 elections discouraged participation, particularly among young people and first-time voters, further reinforcing the perception that voting does not influence outcomes. Politicians rarely deliver on their promises and often escape accountability, even when accused of rigging or abusing office. This perception of elite impunity contributes to mass disengagement, encapsulated in the public sentiment: "Why vote if nothing changes?"

Socioeconomic Hardship and Voter Apathy

Widespread poverty and broader socioeconomic frustrations have also played a critical role in undermining voter participation. As of 2023, 63% of Nigerians were living in multidimensional poverty (UNDP, 2022), while inflation soared to 33.2% and unemployment reached 42.5% in 2024 (NBS, 2024), making daily survival the primary concern for most citizens. In this context, political engagement becomes secondary. Many voters are reduced to clients in a patronage system, accepting cash or food in exchange for votes in what has come to be known as "stomach infrastructure" politics—further weakening democratic accountability.

Structural and Institutional Weaknesses

Nigeria's democratic institutions remain underdeveloped and politically compromised. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has been plagued by logistical failures, including delays in opening polling stations, technological failures such as the malfunctioning of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2023, and allegations of bias. Moreover, Nigeria's political parties remain largely devoid of ideological coherence, with elections dominated by personality-driven campaigns rather than issue-based platforms. The judiciary, tasked with resolving electoral disputes, is perceived as lacking independence, with many controversial rulings seen to favor incumbents or candidates from the ruling party. Weak political institutions, combined with poor infrastructure and limited civic education, discourage faith in the democratic process.

DISCUSSION

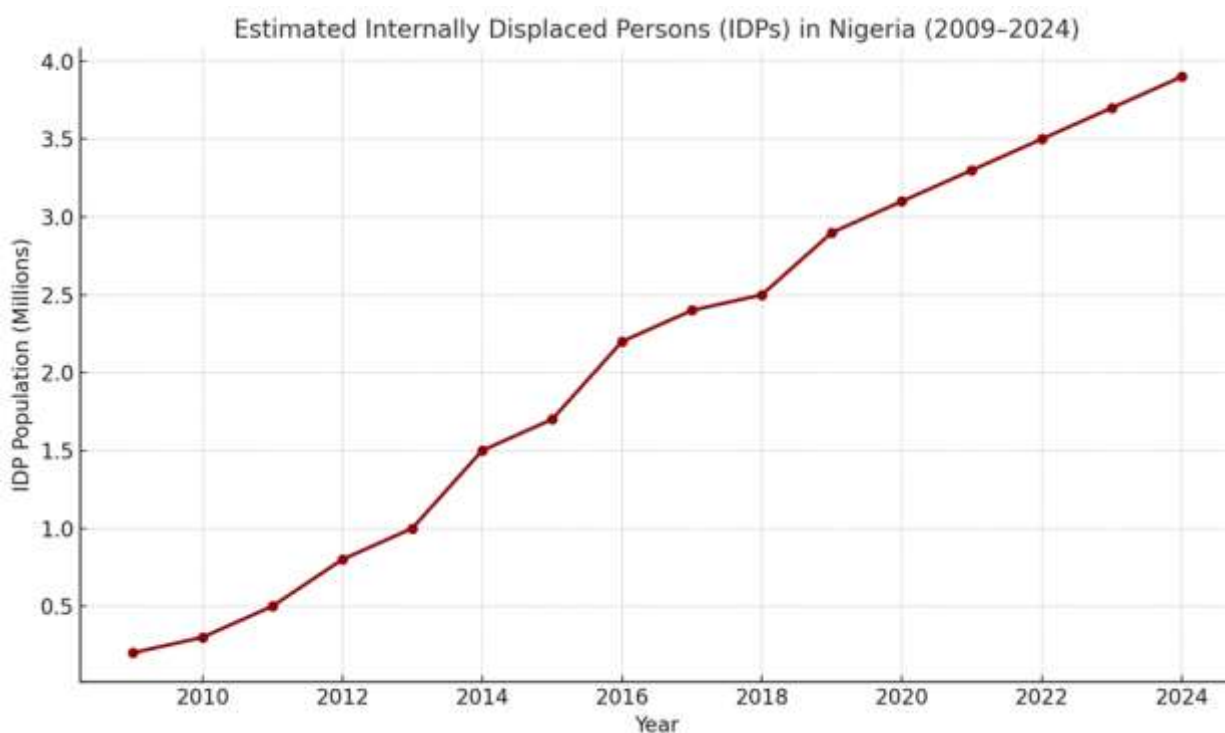
Unpacking the Fallout: Displacement, Agricultural Collapse, and Economic Disruption

The corrosive effects of insecurity in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999 have gone far beyond direct violence, deeply undermining the country's socioeconomic and democratic fabric. As documented by Amnesty International (2020), security forces themselves have become agents of extortion and repression, routinely engaging in arbitrary business closures, illegal checkpoints, and abuses that mirror the very banditry they are meant to counter. In the Northwest, for instance, farmers and traders face dual threats: illegal taxation by criminal gangs and extortion at police checkpoints—a dual form of predation that has eroded economic trust and viability. This systemic insecurity has particularly devastated Nigeria's agricultural sector. Farmers, traders, and business owners are caught between violent non-state actors and corrupt security officials, leading to widespread disinvestment and agricultural decline. The consequences include:

- **Reduced Agricultural Output:** Farmers abandon fields due to fear of attacks or direct displacement.
- **Business Hostility:** Formal and informal businesses face extortion from both criminal networks and state security forces.
- **Risk-Averse Investment Climate:** Domestic and foreign investors increasingly weigh corruption and security risks, often opting out of Nigerian markets.

The direct and indirect economic consequences of such predatory practices, including deterring investment, increasing operational costs for businesses, and reducing consumer confidence, are widely recognized as contributing to economic hardship. Insecurity has weakened democratic consolidation, driven mass displacement, curtailed agricultural output, discouraged foreign direct investment (FDI), and accelerated deindustrialization.

Mass internal displacement has become one of the most visible consequences of persistent insecurity. The line chart below visualizes the sharp rise in Nigeria's internally displaced persons (IDPs) from 2009 to 2024—a trend largely driven by escalating insecurity. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Nigeria's internally displaced population has risen from roughly 200,000 in 2009 to nearly 4 million in 2024. States like Borno, Benue, Plateau, and Zamfara—not only epicenters of violence but also key agricultural zones—have seen the highest displacement rates.



Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria (2009–2024)

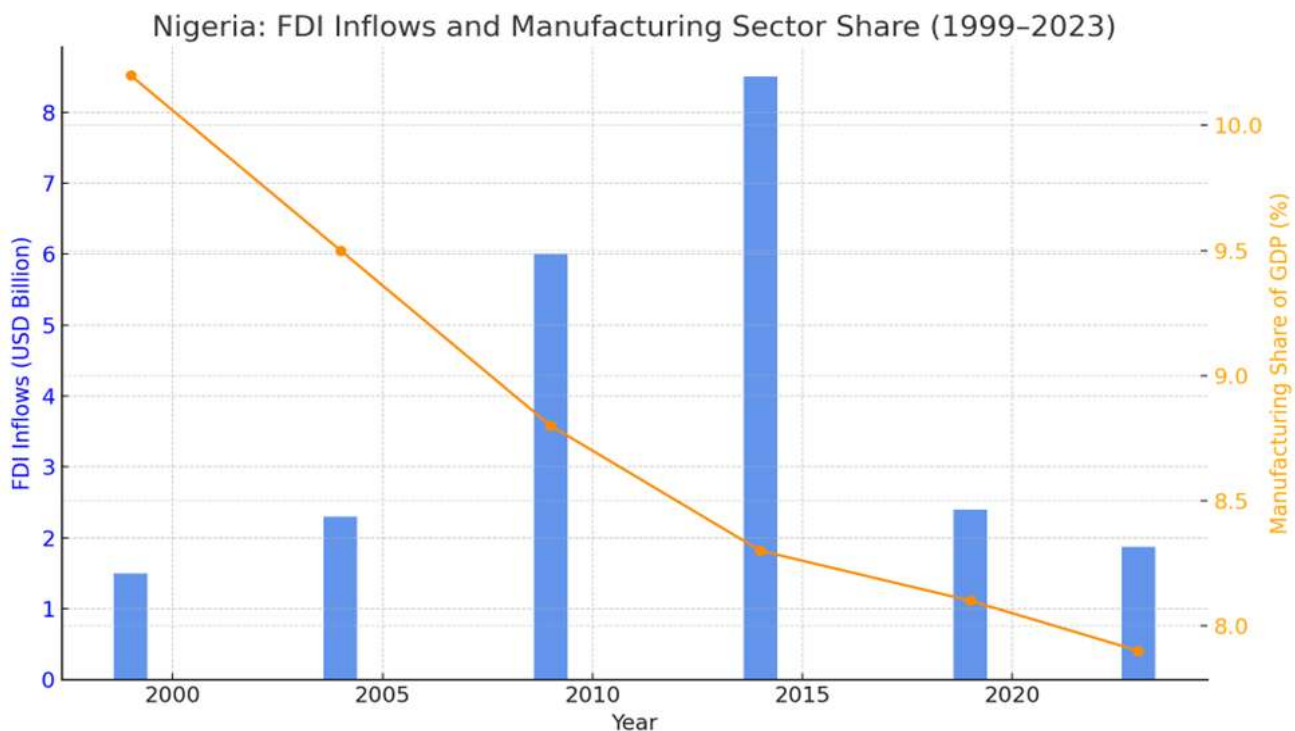
Agricultural Decline and Food Insecurity

Displacement and the fear of violence have significantly reduced Nigeria's agricultural footprint. Many rural farmers have either been killed, kidnapped, or forced to flee, leading to large tracts of abandoned farmland. Farmers in conflict zones have abandoned their fields, resulting in reduced food production and increased reliance on imports. Once a net food exporter, Nigeria's annual food import bill has now reached \$10 billion in 2023, with \$3 billion going toward grains like maize, wheat, and corn, a figure highlighted by the African Development Bank Group (AfDB) (Oyeleran-Oyeyinka, as cited in Thejunction.ng, 2025). Concurrently, 26.5 million Nigerians are projected to face acute food insecurity in 2024, according to the Cadre Harmonisé analysis, which is supported by organizations such as the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization. This represents a significant rise in food insecurity levels compared to previous years (FAO, 2023; World Food Programme, n.d.).

Deindustrialization and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Decline

Further consequences of insecurity include accelerating deindustrialization, particularly in the manufacturing and agro-processing sectors, as well as reducing foreign investment. Nigeria's manufacturing sector's contribution to GDP has significantly declined from 16.26% in 1999 to approximately 8.64% in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025a, 2025b; Macrotrends, n.d.). Many factories in the North have shut down due to persistent threats from insurgents and criminal gangs. Furthermore, Nigeria's perception as a high-risk investment environment has deterred foreign investors. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2024), FDI inflows fell precipitously from \$8.8 billion in 2011 to \$1.87 billion in 2023—the lowest in two decades.

These trends are visually captured in the accompanying chart, which shows the decline in both FDI inflows and the manufacturing sector's share of GDP. These metrics reveal how chronic insecurity has become a major structural barrier to economic transformation and sustainability.



Why Has Democracy Failed to Deliver Human Development?

Despite more than two decades of uninterrupted electoral democracy, Nigeria has failed to translate democratic governance into broad-based human development. Instead of serving as a vehicle for inclusive growth and social

transformation, the democratic process has been repeatedly undermined by systemic failures in governance, elite domination, and institutional decay.

One of the most persistent barriers to human development in Nigeria is entrenched corruption, along with the mismanagement of public resources. Nigeria is estimated to have lost over \$582 billion to corruption since its independence in 1960, a figure often cited by civil society organizations and commentators (Guardian, 2024; Ogune, 2021). Budget allocations to critical sectors, such as healthcare and education, are routinely misappropriated, with less than 30% of the allocated funds reaching their intended projects (BudgIT, 2023). This hemorrhaging of public resources has left critical infrastructure in disrepair and essential services grossly underfunded, perpetuating poverty and inequality.

Democratic governance has also been stymied by weak institutions and elite capture. Rather than functioning as neutral custodians of the public interest, state institutions have become extensions of partisan and rent-seeking networks. Policy-making is often subordinated to the interests of political elites, resulting in the poor implementation of development initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education program and the National Health Insurance Scheme. As a result, state capacity remains weak, and the promise of public service delivery is unfulfilled.

Insecurity and violent conflict have further eroded the developmental foundations of Nigerian democracy. Insurgencies by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Northeast, escalating banditry in the Northwest, and farmer-herder clashes across the Middle Belt have displaced millions and plunged communities into deeper poverty. Public services have collapsed in many conflict-affected areas, with schools and health centers rendered non-functional. The absence of basic human security undermines development, displaces communities, and stifles investment in human capital.

Economic growth has also failed to translate into meaningful social progress. Although Nigeria has experienced modest GDP growth averaging 2.5% since 1999, this growth has not been inclusive. It has disproportionately benefited political and economic elites while poverty and unemployment remain widespread. Youth unemployment stands at an alarming 42.5% (NBS, 2024), contributing to social unrest and political volatility. The structure of Nigeria's economy—overdependent on oil rents and characterized by low productivity—has compounded this exclusionary dynamic.

Pathways to Accelerating Human Development in Nigeria's Fragile Democracy

To reverse Nigeria's declining human development trajectory, it is imperative to confront the structural governance bottlenecks at the heart of its human development crisis. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, successive administrations have emphasized electoral formalism and procedural democracy while failing to deliver substantive social progress. A transformative development approach must go beyond rhetorical commitments to democracy and instead focus on delivering tangible public goods, inclusive institutions, and accountable governance.

At the core of this agenda lies a long-overdue investment in education and healthcare, especially in underserved and conflict-affected regions. Bridging access and gender gaps in these sectors is not only a moral obligation but a foundational requirement for sustainable development. Meeting the benchmarks outlined in the Abuja Declaration—allocating at least 15% of the national budget to education and 10% to health—should be considered non-negotiable. Complementary interventions such as school feeding programs, maternal health initiatives, and social safety nets are critical; however, their design and implementation must avoid the pitfalls of Nigeria's rent-seeking political economy.

Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs, while globally praised for their potential to reduce poverty, have fared poorly in Nigeria. In theory, CCTs link financial assistance to health and education benchmarks, empowering poor households. In practice, however, their implementation has been marred by opacity, elite capture, and systemic corruption. The scandal at the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs exposed deep flaws: unverifiable social registers, non-existent audit trails, and widespread embezzlement. Without a credible, decentralized, and independently verified database of beneficiaries, cash transfers become conduits for treasury

looting rather than instruments of social justice. Scaling such programs under current conditions risks further entrenching dysfunction and public mistrust.

To move beyond this broken model, Nigeria must pivot toward community-based, verifiable, and socially embedded safety nets. These alternatives provide not only immediate relief but also a basis for restoring democratic legitimacy through visible, people-centered governance:

Community-Based Soup Kitchens and Nutrition Hubs

Inspired by successful models in countries like South Korea and Brazil, urban and peri-urban soup kitchens managed by local governments, faith-based groups, and civil society can provide daily meals to the indigent populations. Unlike CCTs, these interventions are immediate, visible, and harder to divert. They also foster a sense of dignity by offering a structured and communal space where the hungry can eat without bureaucratic barriers or political gatekeeping. These facilities humanize welfare by fostering communal solidarity and dignity.

Urban Shelter Programs and Temporary Housing Facilities

The establishment of low-threshold urban shelters—modeled after those in South Korea or Scandinavian countries—can offer daily accommodation, basic healthcare, and psychosocial support to the homeless and displaced. These centers could be operated in partnership with faith-based organizations, local governments, and community associations. They could also serve as points of contact for social workers to offer further integration services.

Universal School Feeding Programs with Local Procurement

Replacing cash-based incentives with universal feeding schemes—procured locally and monitored by parent-teacher associations—can incentivize school attendance, reduce child hunger, and stimulate rural economies. This model offers greater transparency and impact than opaque conditional transfers.

Public Works and Social Employment Schemes

Temporary labor-intensive employment programs in environmental cleanup, infrastructure maintenance, or community agriculture can offer the poor both income and dignity, restore community assets, and reduce dependence. These schemes, if well-managed, create social value while circulating money within local economies. Employment-based safety nets have the added benefit of enhancing civic responsibility and local ownership of development.

Mobile Clinics and Maternal Health Outposts

Investing in mobile health units and maternal health outreach can significantly reduce rural and urban health disparities. Community health workers can provide prenatal care, immunizations, and nutritional education, especially in areas underserved by formal health infrastructure. These are especially critical for reducing maternal and child mortality and can be linked with community health workers for follow-up.

Community Food Banks and Cooperative Stores

Government-supported, community-managed food banks and cooperative stores stocked with essential items for subsidized or free distribution to vulnerable households offer tangible, auditable support for vulnerable households. These institutions can be structured to align with local needs and monitored by civil society to deter leakage.

Institutional strengthening must accompany social investment. Agencies like the EFCC and ICPC require full statutory autonomy, professional leadership insulated from political interference, and the legal teeth to effectively recover stolen assets and prosecute offenders without fear or favor. At the same time, open budgeting, citizen audits, and participatory planning processes must be institutionalized to rebuild trust and ensure accountability in public spending.

Democratic development must also address Nigeria's stark gender disparities. Implementing gender-responsive policies—including legislated affirmative action for women in governance and increased funding for maternal health—can foster more inclusive governance and unlock the economic potential that patriarchal norms have long suppressed. Equitable development also requires a focus on infrastructure. Expanding access to electricity, clean water, and transportation networks—especially in rural areas—is essential for unlocking local economic potential and improving quality of life. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can play a crucial role in mobilizing resources for these investments, but stringent regulatory frameworks and robust public interest safeguards must guide them.

Security reform is equally urgent. Without peace and stability, development initiatives cannot take root. Investing in community policing, deradicalization programs, and the reconstruction of schools and hospitals in conflict zones is vital to restoring state legitimacy and rebuilding fractured communities. Fiscal federalism must also be reformed. The current intergovernmental transfer system is opaque and ineffective. Empowering local governments to manage and be held accountable for service delivery could bridge the gap between citizens and the state, making governance more responsive and localized.

Ultimately, transformative development necessitates the institutionalization of data transparency and open government frameworks. Citizens must be able to track public spending, evaluate the performance of development projects, and participate in decision-making processes. Without such democratic accountability, development outcomes will remain vulnerable to elite manipulation and rent extraction. Nigeria's human development crisis cannot be resolved by technocratic fixes or donor prescriptions alone. What is required is a radical reorientation of governance toward a truly democratic ethos—one grounded in inclusion, transparency, and service delivery. Only by rooting development in democratic accountability and verifiable public investment can Nigeria escape the paradox of an “undemocratic democracy” and begin to build a state that works for its people.

Voter Turnout and Political Participation: Democracy Without the Demos

One of the starkest contradictions of Nigeria's post-1999 democratic experience lies in the coexistence of regular electoral cycles and multiparty competition with deepening political disengagement, insecurity, institutional decay, and socioeconomic hardship. While democratic institutions have endured procedurally, they have increasingly failed to deliver substantively—falling short of enhancing citizen agency, accountability, and material well-being. This reflects the dynamics of what Dahl (1971) terms “procedural democracy,” where democratic rituals persist in form but deteriorate in function.

Nowhere is this erosion more visible than in Nigeria's voter turnout trajectory. Participation has plummeted from 69.1% in 2003 to just 26.7% in the 2023 general elections—among the lowest in Africa and Nigeria's history (Channels Television, 2023, 2023; The Guardian, 2023). In some states, turnout was as low as 16%. This dramatic decline is not simply a function of apathy but a profound symptom of alienation: a growing segment of the population no longer sees voting as a pathway to meaningful change. The electorate's disillusionment aligns with theories of elite capture (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), suggesting that democratic institutions have been commandeered by a narrow political and economic elite, transforming elections into cycles of elite rotation rather than popular empowerment.

Several overlapping factors fuel this disenchantment. Insecurity is among the most pronounced. Rising violence—whether from insurgent groups, communal clashes, or state security forces—has physically and psychologically disenfranchised millions. During the 2023 elections, threats of violence led to the closure of polling units and low turnout across many conflict-affected regions. Amnesty International (2020) reported numerous incidents of extrajudicial killings, voter intimidation, and police complicity in political violence. In many hotspots, voters expressed fear not only of attacks from armed thugs but also from security forces deployed to maintain order. These conditions severely undermine the electoral environment, rendering the franchise unsafe and illegitimate.

Simultaneously, economic hardship has emerged as a critical driver of democratic disengagement. With inflation exceeding 33%, youth unemployment above 40%, and over 63% of Nigerians living in multidimensional poverty

(NBS, 2024; UNDP, 2022), political participation is perceived as a luxury. As developmental governance theory argues, democratic legitimacy cannot be sustained in the absence of effective service delivery and inclusive economic growth (Evans, 1995; Khan, 2010). In Nigeria, the persistent lack of developmental dividends has led to what can be termed "democracy without development"—a condition where elections occur regularly but fail to improve livelihoods.

Youth disengagement further compounds this crisis. Despite comprising a majority of the population, many young Nigerians are increasingly disconnected from the political system, perceiving it as opaque, corrupt, and unresponsive. Perceptions of electoral fraud, lack of transparency, and vote rigging have further eroded public trust. Logistical challenges—such as the late arrival of election materials, malfunctioning biometric systems, and long distances to polling centers—also continue to disenfranchise large segments of the population, particularly in rural areas.

Institutional weaknesses exacerbate the problem. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), despite reforms, continues to face criticism over operational inefficiencies, logistical failures, and susceptibility to political pressure. The judiciary, tasked with adjudicating electoral disputes, is widely perceived as inconsistent and politicized. These shortcomings resonate with Levitsky and Way's (2010) theory of "hollow democracy"—where democratic institutions exist without the capacity or will to enforce accountability or safeguard civic participation.

The cumulative impact of these dynamics is a profound crisis of democratic legitimacy. Nigeria is experiencing a decoupling of elections from representation and political rights from the substance of democracy. Without urgent structural reforms, the country risks institutionalizing a democracy devoid of the demos—a hollow system that functions symbolically but lacks substantive substance. Such a trajectory portends deepening political apathy, rising authoritarian impulses, and the potential for civil unrest, especially in a context of high youth unemployment, ethno-regional tensions, and economic inequality.

Yet, this decline is not immutable. Lessons from countries like South Korea, Tunisia, and Indonesia demonstrate that democratic renewal is possible, even after episodes of elite capture, political violence, and public disillusionment. But such revitalization requires more than routine elections—it demands credible and inclusive electoral processes, stronger institutions, social accountability, and sustained efforts to rebuild public trust. Without these, Nigeria's democratic experiment risks becoming a façade, masking the erosion of political agency and popular sovereignty.

Reclaiming Democratic Control: Paths to Popular Sovereignty

At the core of Nigeria's democratic crisis lies a fundamental question: How can citizens reclaim power from a political system dominated by a predatory elite that has no incentive to relinquish control? This challenge is particularly acute in post-authoritarian societies where political liberalization has failed to dismantle deeply entrenched networks of patronage, corruption, and coercion. The Nigerian case illustrates a scenario in which formal democratic institutions exist alongside *de facto* elite capture. Yet, global and historical experience suggests that systemic transformation—though often slow and uneven—is achievable. Crucially, such change does not originate from elite benevolence but from sustained and organized civic pressure.

Building Mass Civic Consciousness

The foundation of any democratic renewal is a politically informed and engaged citizenry. In Nigeria, civic education remains woefully inadequate, often confined to formal institutions with limited reach. For democratic norms to take root, civic education must extend to informal public spheres—such as markets, religious centers, town halls, and digital spaces—where political narratives are contested and reproduced. Citizens must be equipped not only with knowledge of voting rights but also with a deeper understanding of government functions, public finance, constitutional mandates, and the principles of accountability and transparency. Moreover, countering the disinformation and identity-based propaganda propagated by political elites is vital. A politically literate populace is less vulnerable to manipulation and more likely to demand genuine democratic governance.

Bridging Ethnic and Religious Divides

One of the most enduring obstacles to democratic consolidation in Nigeria is the manipulation of ethnic and religious identities by the political elite. These divisions are not just social or cultural—they are politically weaponized to fragment opposition, reinforce clientelism, and insulate power. Reclaiming democratic control requires a deliberate effort to build cross-ethnic and interfaith solidarity. This involves supporting leaders based on competence and integrity rather than ethnoregional affinity. It also necessitates building alliances across regions and demographic groups—especially among youth, professionals, women, and civil society actors—to create a broad-based democratic coalition capable of challenging elite dominance.

Leveraging Technology and Independent Media

In the digital era, technology, and independent media constitute vital tools for challenging elite control over information. Social media platforms, podcasts, and blogs allow citizens to produce and disseminate alternative political narratives, expose corruption, and mobilize collective action. Investigative journalism and citizen reporting can pierce the opacity of governance and generate public accountability. To make this sustainable, legal protections for whistleblowers and robust open data regimes are essential. However, digital tools must be coupled with media literacy initiatives to guard against misinformation, polarization, and surveillance.

Organizing Credible Political Alternatives

While street protests and civil society activism are important, they must be complemented by viable political alternatives that can contest and win power. Historically, Nigeria's reformist energy has often failed to translate into institutionalized political change due to the dominance of personality-driven movements and weak organizational capacity. What is needed are parties or platforms anchored in clear, issue-based agendas, internal democracy, and strategic coalition-building. Reformist movements must be willing to engage electorally, not just rhetorically, and must prepare to challenge entrenched parties at the ballot box with coherent programs and grassroots support.

Enforcing Electoral Integrity and Institutional Autonomy

Institutional reform is indispensable for reclaiming democratic control. Nigeria's electoral process continues to suffer from credibility deficits, including vote buying, rigging, and judicial compromise. To rectify this, electoral reforms must include digital voter registration, transparent collation processes, and the depoliticization of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Judicial independence must be restored so that courts can fairly adjudicate electoral disputes and enforce anti-corruption laws. Likewise, agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC require non-partisan leadership, statutory autonomy, and oversight mechanisms that prevent their capture by political interests.

Engaging in Strategic Civil Disobedience and Mass Mobilization

Peaceful civil disobedience remains a powerful mechanism for democratic resistance. The #EndSARS movement demonstrated the potential of youth-led, decentralized mobilization to disrupt the status quo and compel government response. However, for such movements to yield structural change, they must mature into sustained campaigns with defined goals, leadership structures, and continuity plans. Strategic disruption—through mass protests, legal activism, and policy advocacy—can apply pressure on institutions while galvanizing public consciousness.

What Will It Take to Transform Nigerian Democracy?

Transforming Nigeria's democracy requires far more than periodic elections or the appeal of charismatic leadership. The real work lies in cultivating principled grassroots leadership rooted in communities, not in elite patronage networks. Sustainable change is forged through long-term organizing, political education, and civic participation—rather than fleeting moments of enthusiasm or reformist slogans. Most crucially, democratic renewal demands a collective readiness to bear the social and political costs of transformation: the time, labor, resources, and risks required to challenge deeply entrenched systems of privilege.

At the heart of Nigeria's democratic malaise is not a deficit of institutions or electoral rituals but a crisis of political will. The central struggle is not merely between democracy and authoritarianism but between popular sovereignty and elite capture. Reform will not emerge from benevolent gestures by the political class—it will be the result of sustained citizen resistance that makes elite impunity untenable. This process will not begin in Abuja; it must begin in everyday spaces, such as local communities, schools, workplaces, and religious institutions, where Nigerians reject passivity and start constructing democratic power from below.

A transformative vision of democracy in Nigeria must, therefore, transcend electoral formalism and focus on the substance of governance. The true test of a democratic system lies in its ability to deliver public goods, safeguard human dignity, and create equitable opportunities for all. Until governance is reoriented around accountability, inclusion, and social justice, democracy will remain structurally hollow—an undemocratic democracy defined by its failure to serve the many.

Nigeria does not lack resources, talent, or institutional blueprints; it lacks an organized political will aligned with the needs and aspirations of the majority. Reclaiming democratic control and advancing human development will require more than technical reforms—it will demand a fundamental reimagining of politics as a tool of collective emancipation rather than elite self-preservation. Unless this shift occurs, democracy in Nigeria will remain a façade: formally constituted but substantively bankrupt, a system that legitimizes power without redistributing it.

In the final analysis, the future of Nigerian democracy depends not on the next election cycle or the next generation of leaders but on whether citizens are willing to assume ownership of the democratic project itself. Only a well-informed, united, and persistently mobilized populace can reclaim the democratic promise from the grip of oligarchic control and redirect it toward the pursuit of the common good.

CONCLUSION

Democracy Without Development is a Mirage

Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 marked a pivotal opportunity to recalibrate governance, deliver economic progress, and expand civil liberties. Yet, over two decades later, the democratic experiment has yielded mixed results at best—and outright failure for many. While democratic governance has endured in procedural terms, its developmental dividends remain elusive. The majority of Nigerians continue to face worsening poverty, collapsing public services, rising insecurity, and institutionalized impunity. Democracy, as it currently functions in Nigeria, has become a hollow performance: procedurally intact but substantively bankrupt.

At the core of this democratic dysfunction is the systematic mismanagement of public resources and entrenched corruption. Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria is estimated to have lost over \$582 billion to corruption, with less than one-third of budgetary allocations to health, education, and infrastructure reaching their intended targets. Political office has become a gateway to private enrichment rather than a platform for public service, eroding public trust and undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The failure to enforce credible deterrents, coupled with the politicization of anti-corruption efforts, has entrenched a culture of elite impunity.

Moreover, the Nigerian state has been captured by a narrow class of political elites who operate through rent-seeking networks and patronage systems. Democratic institutions meant to serve the public interest have instead become tools of elite consolidation, sidelining citizen participation and subverting accountability. Elections, rather than serving as mechanisms for democratic renewal, have devolved into costly, violent contests for access to state resources, with limited bearing on policy outcomes or governance quality.

Compounding this crisis is Nigeria's persistent insecurity. The spread of insurgency, banditry, communal violence, and state violence has displaced millions, hollowed out communities, and disrupted development across vast regions. In many areas, the state has effectively lost control, and citizens are trapped between predatory non-state actors and abusive security forces. Insecurity is not only a developmental crisis—it is a democratic one. As citizens lose faith in the state's ability to protect them, the very foundations of democratic legitimacy begin to erode. The paradox of electoral democracy unfolding under conditions of mass fear,

exclusion, and violence is starkly reflected in Nigeria's declining voter turnout, which hit a historic low of 27% in 2023 (Channels Television., 2023).

Critically, Nigeria's economic growth over the past two decades has failed to produce inclusive or equitable outcomes. GDP growth has largely enriched a narrow elite, while youth unemployment has soared to over 42% (NBS, 2024). Public infrastructure remains dilapidated, and basic services—particularly in education, health, and housing—are either underfunded or inaccessible. The overreliance on oil rents and the neglect of diversified, labor-intensive sectors have entrenched inequality and stifled opportunity for the majority.

Yet, democracy itself is not inherently at fault. Rather, it is the perversion of democratic principles by kleptocratic elites, weak institutions, and foreign interests more concerned with stability than justice that have rendered Nigeria's democracy unresponsive. Western actors have often endorsed democratic form without demanding substantive reform, prioritizing geopolitical and commercial interests over democratic consolidation. This international complacency has further insulated Nigeria's ruling class from accountability.

To escape the trap of “undemocratic democracy,” Nigeria must embark on a bold and honest reform agenda. This includes strengthening the rule of law, decentralizing governance, empowering local governments, and expanding democratic participation beyond elections to include civic organizing, oversight, and policy influence. Public institutions—especially anti-corruption agencies, electoral bodies, and the judiciary—must be shielded from political interference and vested with real autonomy. Investment in human development, infrastructure, and gender-responsive policies is critical—not only as a moral imperative but as a strategic foundation for economic transformation.

Most importantly, democracy must be reclaimed by the people. True democratic transformation will not begin in Abuja but in every local community, workplace, school, and civil space where Nigerians organize to demand transparency, inclusion, and equity. Until citizens assume ownership of the democratic process and challenge the monopolization of power by elites, democratic governance will remain largely performative rather than transformative.

In sum, Nigeria's democratic journey since 1999 has revealed a fundamental disconnect between political form and developmental substance. Without urgent structural reforms, democratic deepening, and a radical shift in political will, the country risks entrenching a democracy of diminishing returns—one that preserves elite privilege while marginalizing the majority. For democracy to mean more than ballots and slogans, it must be made to work for the people. Absent that transformation, Nigeria risks not only democratic stagnation but also systemic collapse.

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