

# A Case For The Nigeria Civil Service As A Fourth Arm Of Democratic Governance Camillus O. Ugwu, Ed.D., MPA.

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## Abstract

*Democratic governance hinges on three arms of government; the executive, legislative, and judiciary. The formation of government with the three branches is for the purpose of checks and balances of governance. This creates room for separation of powers in government. Separation of power allows each arm to limit the controls of the others. But no room is left for the participation of the civil service at this level of power distribution and control. The civil service is relegated to the mere subservient status of executing and evaluating policies and programs of the government. Civil services are at the service of these three arms of government, without participating in the development of government policies and programs.*

*Civil service is the arrowhead of government. Civil service was left out, ab initio, from the procedural policy design but still required to seamlessly implement government policies and programs. Nigeria civil service reforms need to place civil service in a strong participatory position in policy development. Not until Nigeria democracy recognizes civil service as the fourth arm of democratic governance Nigeria may continue to waste huge resources in the implementation of government policies, programs, and service delivery.*

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## I. Introduction

Democratic governance as institution that is built on democratic values is anchored anchors on three arms of government: the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judiciary. The three arms collectively safeguard the rule of law, policy formation, and oversight through separation of powers. The intent of separation of their powers is ...to protect the citizens from the emergence of tyrannical government by establishing multiple heads of authority in government . . . to deny to anyone (or two) of them the capacity ever to consolidate all government authority in itself, while permitting the whole effectively to carry forward the work of government (Strauss, 1984).

The arm-based design of separation of powers preempts the political dynamics that are supposed to provide each arm with a will of its own (Levinson & Pildes, 2006). The civil service, though not constitutionally recognized as a branch of government, plays a pivotal role in sustaining democratic governance. The Nigerian civil service remains the arrowhead through which the government implements its policies and delivery of services. According to Agbodike, Osawe, and Igbokwe-Ibeto (2015), the British . . . left a civil service that was efficient and effective . . . and managed to distinguish itself. . . long after the colonial era. However, it has undergone several restructuring or reforms overtime to serve subsequent colonial, military, and civilian administrations. This paper explores the proposition that the Nigerian civil service should be reviewed as a fourth arm of democratic governance through a constitutional reform due to its strategic role in policy continuity, institutional memory, and service delivery. This paper is also a contribution to the national search for the fundamental options that should guide our understanding of the relationship between public administration and democratic governance in Nigeria (Olaopa, 2025).

## Historical Context

The Nigerian civil service has evolved considerably both during colonial era and since independence. The known key reforms include devolution of administrative authorities and powers (1945), formation and regional public service boards in the regions (1948) and streamlining of the civil service into two broad groups, professionals and generalists (1954) during the colonial era. The colonial era civil service birthed decentralized regional civil service (Onyekwena, 2022). Since independence various

commissions have been set up for civil service reforms. The civilian and military eras have equal doses of civil service reforms. These include the Morgan Commission (1964), the Elwood Commission (1966), the Adebo Commission (1971), the Udoji Commission (1974), the Dotun Philip (1985), the Longe Commission (1991), the Ayida Review Panel (1995), the Obasanjo Reform (2004), the Yar'adua Reform (2009), and the Steve Oronsaye Committee (2012).

These commissions sought to address the structural and operational deficits in the civil service.

The various reforms of the civil service aim at improving its efficiency and effectiveness for seamless policy execution and service delivery. However, none of them envisioned the civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance. The reform efforts also shared missed opportunities as politicization, corruption, and inefficiency persist in the rank and file of the Nigeria civil service. Despite this, the Nigeria civil service remains a vital unifying force in the Nigeria democratic system which its potential is yet to be fully harnessed.

### **Conceptual Framework**

An “arm” or “branch” of governance refers to a constitutionally recognized institution with distinct powers and responsibilities. Each arm of government with its distinctive powers checks on the other arms to maintain balance of power and to avoid undue influence on others and the entire democratic system. However, an efficient approach to governance identifies institutions that play strategic roles in sustaining democratic processes. The civil service, while not constitutionally defined as an arm or branch, fulfills essential functions that support the executive, legislative, and judicial arms of government. It “can provide another type of check and balance, alongside relationships within and between the three traditional branches of government” (Blumer 2019). The effectiveness of democratic governance is “determined by the efficiency and competence of the civil service, as the civil service is not a political body whose members serves in the different branches of government” (Oaikhena & Osaghae 2016). The 1999 Nigeria Constitution, Section 318, views the civil service as Service of the Federation in a civil capacity as staff of the office of the President, the Vice-President, a ministry or department of the government of the Federation assigned with the responsibility for any business of the Government of the Federation.

This view of the civil service signifies a “unitary executive” (Shah, 2023). The view of the civil service by the 1999 Nigeria Constitution focuses on the structural layout of the civil service than the function or responsibilities of the civil service (Agbodike, et.al. 2015). It meshes the executive arm of government into the civil service, exerting executive influence on otherwise an independent institution.

This paper uses a comparative method to explore how the Nigerian civil service compares with other world nations in positioning the civil service as a fourth arm of government. Models from some other countries will be examined as sample cases to illustrate the viability of repositioning the Nigeria civil service as a fourth arm of government. They will serve as comparative models to demonstrate how a professional and autonomous civil service can improve governance outcomes in Nigeria. This framework supports the argument for recognizing the civil service as a functional fourth arm of democratic governance.

### **Strategic Role of the Civil Service**

The role of the civil service is strategic, purposeful, effective, and efficacy in creating stable democratic governance. Hickey and Rivera (2024) hold that the civil service is an independent institution enhancing democratic integrity and accountability through constitutional design. But unlike the elected bodies, the civil service derives its legitimacy from the public trust in its impartiality and integrity (2024). It separates the executive branch, which is partisan and seeks to pursue certain policy agendas, from the permanent institutions of the state, which are supposed to be neutral and non-partisan (Blumer, 2019). However, Inakefe and Umoh (2022) hold that the contrary is the case in the Nigeria civil service. There are constant interactions and inferences between politics and public service delivery that at times impede democratic possess. But fundamentally, the civil service is instrumental in policy and program implementation.

The civil service in its pivotal role in democratic governance ensures continuity across political transitions, preserving institutional memory, and facilitating long- term planning among the three arms of government. This is evident in the Nigeria civil service that continued holding the political transitions from the different democratic and military leadership interplay in Nigeria politics. The civil service carries similar roles in the advanced democratic societies like the USA, Canada, or the UK. The civil service is effective when promoting public policy tailored to the welfare of the people. It is also effective when it is carrying its responsibilities to generate transparency in the execution

of government programs and yet submissive to public scrutiny that avails the citizens the opportunity to understand government policies and how they affect their lives (Agbodike, et.al. 2015).

As an assemblage of professionals and administrators, civil service staff are responsible for translating political decisions into meaningful and actionable programs. Ishaq (2014) echoes that the civil service has the major task of translating into concrete actions the policies of political bodies, regulating and managing all aspects of the economy of a society. Its role also includes maintaining administrative stability and engaging the citizens to deliver public services. Their expertise and institutional knowledge make them indispensable to the functioning of government and the sustainability of democratic governance.

The civil service in Nigeria has historically been the pillar of government operation, yet its role remains underappreciated and underutilized. Despite previous civil service reform initiatives to address these shortfalls in the civil service it still remains the bedrock of public service delivery in Nigeria. There are examples of such reform initiatives aimed at addressing the underappreciative bents of the civil servants. The *Ayida Review Panel* (1994) sought to improve remunerations of civil servants with salary adjustment while the *Dotun Philip Commission* (1985) addressed the underutilization of the civil servant by appraising the structure, composition, and the methods of operation to meet government delivery of service. The *Yar'adua Reform* (2009) reviewed the civil service organizational efficiency, professional, ethical, and accountable workforce with improved competence of civil servants. The *Steve Oronsaye Committee* (2012) took a huge purge of the civil service structure to address the underutilization of the civil service as well. The commission sets off the disbanding of 102 agencies from 263, eliminating and merging 38 and 53 agencies respectively, and reversed 14 agencies to departments. Though the two previous administrations, the Goodluck Jonathan and Buhari administrations, accepted the *Oronsaye Committee* report, the report is yet to see the light of day for full implementation by successive administrations. For such lack of continuity, adequate utilization of the civil service remains currently a mirage in Nigeria democratic governance as the reforms remain at best academic exercises.

The civil service continues to struggle to perform its functions as independent regulatory oversight institutions with neutrality and autonomy of administrators. But it still continues to protect procedural fairness and needless political overreach, ensuring electoral process, preservation of judicial and legal system autonomy, and financial integrity to prevent corruption (Blumer, 2019). The Nigeria democratic system has commissions such as the Civil Service Commission (CSC), the Independent National Election Commission (INEC), the Federal Judicial Service Commission (FJSC) or the National Judicial Council (NJC), the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the Police Service Commission (PSC) for checks and balances. The major aim of these commissions is to shield each arm of government from undue control and influence. There are still other commissions designed to enable the civil service to perform the operation of the government with neutrality and autonomy.

The neutrality and autonomy of the civil service is desirable for it to adequately fulfil its constitutional responsibilities. Such responsibilities include the promotion of good governance through managing the public resources ethically and ensuring that government programs meet the needs of the populace. It also has the responsibility of supporting democratic institutions, maintaining records, and as a stabilizing force in times of political uncertainty. Its role has continued to expand in scope and bounds so as its importance is growing all the time (Inakefe & Godwin, 2022). The other arms of government will continue to rely on the civil service to perform their duties to the citizens. Appleby (1946) as quoted in Inakefe and Godwin (2022) indicates that in most cases, the legislators rely on the public servants to generate inputs and draft bills for presentation to the legislative assembly. With the strategic role and responsibilities that the civil service has in the Nigeria democratic governance it still does not position itself as a fourth arm of government due to the constant challenges it faces as the other arms of government try to gain control over it. The challenges are real to the civil service.

### **Challenges Facing the Nigerian Civil Service**

Despite the civil service's strategic importance, there are several challenges that it faces constantly on the federal, state, and local levels as it attempts to perform its responsibilities to the public. These challenges are reflections of the challenges of public administration in Nigeria democratic system. These have made critics to question the ability of the civil service to deliver timely and credible services to the public. This is because the challenges form barriers to the effectiveness and efficacy of civil service doubting how government would fulfil its programs. Hickey and Rivera (2024) point out that the challenges political meddling, resource shortfalls and controls, weak enforcement organs, and deficient public engagement –minimize the civil service functional abilities to deliver service to the public.

Political inference undermines Nigerian civil service autonomy and expertise, while inefficiency and corruption erode public trust. Ishaq (2014) remarks that it is no longer news to hear of interference by especially the executive arm of government in a purely administrative sphere of the state. He holds that the civil service must not be interfered with not only in principles guiding its conduct, but also in the discharge of its duties. In his review of presidential interference in the American civil service Shah (2023) states that:

The exercise of extensive appointment or removal power may also allow the President or their proxies to direct agency adjudicators in a manner that leads to reduced administrative accountability to the values and expectations, held by Congress and the public, that agencies promote impartiality and expertise in administrative decision and policymaking.

In other words, this shows great capacity to limit the civil service ability to function optimally as it may twist its decisional independence.

Political interference in the civil service breathes corruption into the system. Johnston (2005) defines corruption as the abuse of trust, generally one involving public power for private benefits. It centers around the appropriation of public resources for private gains (Fukuyama, 2014). Most areas where this infraction occurs between the civil service and the executive arm of government are recruitment, placement, promotion, discipline of staff, and award of contracts. It is well known that it is a threat to democracy and economic development. The Nigeria civil service is no different. In 2003 the Obasanjo administration established the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to mute this challenge and its corresponding corruption. Even so, the civil service often finds itself between serving the public interest and appeasing political appointees or government officials. This casts a spell on the deftness of the EFCC to stamp out corruption in the Nigeria civil service. The current public cry is that the EFCC as we know it is a political tool used to witch-hunt political opponents (Agbo, 2025). This tends to diminish the purpose of establishing the EFCC as a crime prevention agency in the public perception.

Other challenges that the Nigerian civil service faces include resistance to change, lack of infrastructure and modern technology, ethnicity, and regional imbalances. Resistance to change dampens the civil service efforts to improve transparency (Nigerian Civil Service News, 2024; Ishaq, 2014) while lack of modern technology increases the level of errors in record-keeping and record retrieval (Ihenacho, 2017). Ethnic and regional imbalances weaken unity in the civil service and lead to the appointment of less qualified individuals over more competent candidates (Ihenacho). The federal character commission (FCC) has failed in its effort to fix the imbalance in the civil service because of ethnic inequalities leading to lack of attraction of qualified individuals in the civil service workforce (Mustapha, 2007).

An example of resistance to change in the civil service is the inability to implement the Steve Oronsaye commission report. The report as adjudged will in no small measures put the Nigerian public service in a better position to deliver service efficiently and effectively to the citizens (Abiodun, Oyekanmi, Olayinka, and Oyewole, 2024). When the civil service faces these challenges that undermine its ability to deliver public service, practical implementation of policies and program, it raises more questions whether it is apt to function independently as a fourth arm of government. Addressing these challenges is vital to repositioning the Nigeria civil service as a pillar of democratic governance.

## **II. Case Studies**

The Nigeria civil service requires continuous improvement, reform, or restructuring. This will inject efficiency into the civil service. It is evident that tying efficient public service delivery to a nation's ability fosters economic growth, reduces poverty, and promotes inclusive progress through consistent reform implementation (Olajide, Abiodun, & Olawale, 2024).

There is a need for comparison of Nigeria civil service reform with other nations that have shown tact in public service delivery of government policies and programs. It is necessary to state that reform enhances robust economy of any nation that follows through the right reform. Several case studies illustrate the potential and pitfalls of civil service reform. In Nigeria, the Service Compact with All Nigerians (SERVICOM) among others is vital in civil service reform.

The Obasanjo administration created SERVICOM in 2004 to improve service delivery in the federal civil service. It is intended to ensure accountability, transparency, and public approval. But this hyped reform initiative remains unattainable due to poor implementation and sparse political will by the elected officials. Resource constraints, resistance to change, corruption, and lack of right personnel stifled the implementation of SERVICOM. The public considers SERVICOM as another missed opportunity to reform the Nigeria civil service and reposition it in the path to an independent

institution to play a vital role in democratic governance because of persistent corruption and perfecting strategies for exploiting and oppressing the people (Agboola, 2016). The other agent of reform is the Federal Civil Service Strategy and Implementation Plan (FCSSIP 2021-2025).

The Buhari administration created the initial FCSSIP 2017-2020 in 2017. Then follows the FCSSIP 2021-2025 in 2021. The FCSSIP 2021-2025 offered a clear path to holistic execution of necessary reforms that align with the civil service reform agenda. Magbadelo (2024) regards the FCSSIP 2021-2025 as a creative design meant to give direction to the reform process in the civil service. From every indication, FCSSIP 2021-2025 made steps in digital sphere and performance management, showing the impact of targeted reforms in civil service delivery efforts (Magbadelo). However, its full implementation remains elusive due to the same resource constraints.

In comparison to the Nigerian civil service reform agenda is the Singapore's Public Service for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (PS21). Singapore created PS21 in 1995 as a reform program to prepare the country's civil service for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. PS21 is a program created in the face of growing global competition to reposition the country's civil service to improve its responsiveness and empower the civil servants to innovate. PS21 was borne out of the view that 21<sup>st</sup> century public servants are often working in 19<sup>th</sup> century style organizations where incentives, growth opportunities and performance management framework do not support the development of new skills and roles needed to work in collaborative ways, both across organizations and with citizens (Mangan, 2017). Similar to the Singapore's PS21 is the USAID civil service reform guide (2023).

The USAID civil service reform guide promotes the US experience in the civil service reform initiative. The guide espouses programmatic analysis of civil service reform approaches. The Guide first acknowledges the vital role of civil service in the function of government in supporting or undermining a government ability to public service delivery. This is one of the key reasons for civil service reform if government needs to improve its policy and program delivery to the public. The explanation for civil service reform centers on government effort to deliver effective, affordable, accountable, and responsive public services (2023).

Another example to give in this case study is the UK's Five Pillars of Civil Service Reform. It was established by the UK's Cabinet Office in collaboration with the Head of the Civil Service in 2012. Choosing the UK's civil service reform initiative makes sense here considering that the Nigeria civil service is rooted in its colonial past. The British colonial administration shapes the bureaucratic structures and practice of that continues to define the Nigerian public service (Olajide, et. el., 2024). The UK's Five Pillars of Civil Service Reform aims to create as civil service that is more capable, less bureaucratic, and more efficient. It focused on strong leadership, highly skilled, inclusive and thriving workforce, digital transformation, collaborative working structures, and public or citizen trust (Johnstone, Benita & Punch, 2024). Both Nigerian civil service reforms, SERVICOM and FCSSIP, share a lot of similarity with the UK's Five Pillars of the Civil Service reform. The examples that the case study portray provide valuable lessons for the Nigeria's civil service reform initiative. They are indicative that the Nigerian civil service could achieve the same reform feat when the political will is there.

### **III. Policy Implications**

Recognizing the civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance has significant policy implications. It entails the rise of powerful administrative agencies equipped with executive power and powers belonging to the other arms: legislative – rule-making and judicial – deciding rights, disputes and justice in individual cases (Brown, 2018). The civil service already occupies a unique position in the state structure. However, it does not share the same statutory rights as the executive, the legislator, or the judiciary. Its legitimacy is outside of electoral victory as the executive and legislative arms and the impartial judgement and legal interpretation as the judicial arm of government (Hickey & Rivera, 2024). The civil service is composed of appointed officials or through recruitment processes. To share the same statutory rights as the other three arms, it requires exercise of autonomy, free from political interferences in financial operation, staffing and agendas in recruitment, promotion, remuneration, reward and reprimand.

A major policy implication of the civil service as a fourth arm of government is the legal reform, requiring constitutional amendments or statutory entrenchment.

Fostering this requires a clear mandates, jurisdictional boundaries, and appeal means to avoid conflicts with the other arms. After taking care of the legal implication, the next step is to institutionalize merit-based recruitment, continuous training, and robust performance management systems in the civil service. It will also enshrine integrity and non-partisan oversight, especially in the

areas of procurement, elections, and public service ethics.

The overreaching policy implication of the civil service as a fourth arm of government is the transformative shift in democratic governance. The fourth arm of government will begin to emphasize integrity, transparency, efficiency, and accountability with greater potential to strengthen democratic resilience. It will make the civil service a compelling policy innovation in program and service delivery. It will integrate the civil service into democratic governance frameworks to enhance policy continuity, improve service delivery, and foster public trust. The legal restructuring to enhance the civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance will embolden the Nigerian Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) in the provision of the democratic dividends to the public.

#### **IV. Recommendations**

The desire to reform the civil service and reposition it to enhance public service delivery is not exclusively for the developing nations like Nigeria. Most advanced nations are constantly looking for the best ways to take care of their citizens in the provision of good services. The case studies shown in this research clearly point to that fact. There is always room to improve an existing system as the public needs arise. Every nation should be open to learning from each other whatever policy, after careful study, is adaptive to their situation.

Magbadelo's (2024) appraisal of FCSSIP25 recommends six areas of reform that the Nigeria civil service should focus on. In his view, the civil service needs reform in the areas of Capability / Capacity Building and Talent Management; Performance Management System; Integrated Personnel & Payroll Information System - Human Resources (PPIS-HR); Innovation; Digitalization of Content Services, and Staff Welfare. These areas of reform align with the current public service delivery demands. Each nation keeps looking on how to gain competitive advantage in the global service delivery for their citizens. This study also proposes other recommendations with the hope to improve the civil service and reposition it as a fourth arm of government that will not overlap the functions of the other three arms.

**Legal and Regulatory Reforms:** Making the civil service a fourth arm of government is a constitutional issue. This reform proposes the civil service as a distinct governance pillar, parallel to the judiciary or legislature, to safeguard its autonomy. The legal reform will take care of the Nigeria civil service to reform its hiring and compensation system to reflect market realities and attract top talents. This will not only attract, especially younger professionals but also curb the incessant labor strikes in Nigeria. The legal reform will also aim to streamline personnel management by enabling flexible performance-based career pathways.

**Institutional Independence and Integrity:** This will help to establish an across-the-board integrity agency to administer governance standards and inspect all levels of government services and programs. This will provide oversight of checks on government actions, promote the implementation of policies and programs, and foster accountability, transparency and efficiency within the state (Hickey & Rivera, 2024). It will also strengthen merit-based recruitment, promotions, and attract quality appointments and insulates the Nigeria civil service from political interference.

**Public-Centric Service Delivery:** Public service must place the citizens first. With such instrument, the government will be able to deliver its programs and good services to the citizens. Public service agencies are created for this purpose and are designed to meet this purpose only, service delivery to the public. The civil service is only as good when it serves the public creditably. The measure for a credible public service delivery is the citizen satisfaction and their improved well-being. It is problematic if the civil service is unable to satisfy the yearnings of the people (Magbadelo, 2020). Public policy design is not enough if such policy does not advance the well-being of the citizens. The Nigeria civil service reform must consider the public-centric nature of public service as the bedrock of its reform, which administrative effectiveness and efficiency must anchor on.

**Civil Engagement and Democratic Participation:** For democracy to thrive as the government of the people, for the people, and by the people, civil engagement is necessary for efficient and effective democratic governance. Public participation in democratic governance should expand beyond the voting rights of the citizens but also in policy and program design. The USA government has the Federal Register through the National Archives to foster public participation in the government policy designs. A robust public participation in civil service delivery makes for a stronger democratic governance. The civil service agencies should function as a watch-dog for a full delivery of democratic

dividends to the Nigerian public. It is imperative that reform of the civil service should involve the public to achieve it.

**Cultural and Ethical Reorientation:** The Nigerian civil service requires a cultural reform through codes of conduct and leadership development. It is necessary to begin a reform that will not only attract the best talents but also have the civil service that embeds values, fairness, and service. The Nigerian civil service needs ethical reorientation, the work ethics that will increase the productivity level, foster sense of mission and service ownership by the civil servants. These reforms, when properly implemented, could reposition the civil service as a fourth arm of government with constitutional values and public interest.

### **Expected Outcomes**

This study examines the potential outcomes of recognizing the Nigerian civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance through a broad-based reform. It explores how such a reform could foster administrative continuity, policy implementation, accountability, and democratic governance. Comparing with other nations' civil service reforms the Nigerian civil service reform will expect in governance to improve policy continuity and reduce political interference in public service sector. The reform expects to create an accountability measure with a stronger internal controls and performance-based evaluation. The reform expects also to enhance efficiency and citizen satisfaction in service delivery while creating checks on executive overreach. The public will begin to trust the civil service because of an increased transparency in the system. The civil service will position itself well enough as an independent institution as a fourth arm in democratic governance to deliver efficient service effectively.

### **V. Conclusion**

The Nigerian civil service remains a strategic institution that reinforces democratic governance. It has also made great progress in its reform initiatives in line with other nations of the world. Like the UK's Five Pillars, Singapore's PS21, or the USAID Guide, the Nigerian SERVICOM and FCSSIP2021-2025 stand the test of civil service reform as path to positioning the Nigerian civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance. By formally affirming the civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance, Nigeria can harness its potential to drive innovation, accountability, and sustainable development. The reform is practical, and its implementation yields effective service delivery to the public.

However, the Nigerian 1999 Constitutional definition of civil service that centers on the executive arm of government makes it difficult or nearly impossible in positioning it as a fourth arm of democratic governance. It requires bold reforms with strong political will and sustained commitment to professionalizing the public sector to recognize the civil service as a fourth arm of democratic governance. The Nigerian political authorities should muster the political will to allow the civil service function efficiently and effectively (Agbodike, et. el., 2015). The only barrier between the Nigeria civil service reform to the fourth arm and proper implementation of the reform is the political interference and the lack of political will to do so. The Nigerian civil service will continue to function as the pillar of service delivery of government program to the citizen. But it requires constitutional backing to function independently as a fourth arm of government without the other arms overreach.

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