

Nigeria's Political Development Since Independence: Leadership, Corruption, And Institutional Resilience

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Abstract

This article offers a sweeping appraisal of Nigeria's political evolution from independence in 1960 to the present, with particular attention to the corrosive and recurring phenomenon of corruption that has persistently constrained national development and good governance. It traces a trajectory marked by alternating hopes and disillusionments—periods in which leaders promised reform but where institutional frailty and entrenched malfeasance repeatedly frustrated renewal. The study examines the colonial inheritance, the long shadow of military regimes, the dynamics and rhythms of graft, the achievements and limits of the Fourth Republic, and the tension between constitutional structures and informal political practice. In so doing it identifies pathways by which stronger institutions, more meaningful electoral reforms, and deeper demands for accountability might yet reduce Nigeria's chronic mismanagement of its vast resources.

Keywords: Leadership, Corruption, Accountability, Military Rule.

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I. Introduction

Nigeria's political odyssey since 1960 is rightly described as a mixture of aspiration, upheaval, and persistent difficulty, with leadership and corruption occupying the centre stage of its story. Independence was greeted with widespread optimism: a conviction that self-rule would usher in unity, prosperity, and more equitable development. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa captured that mood in his independence address: "This is a wonderful day, and it is all the more wonderful because we have awaited for it with increasing impatience, compelled to watch one country after another overtaking us on the road when we had so nearly reached our goal."

Yet that early optimism was swiftly clouded by political instability, deep ethnic cleavages, and the spread of corrupt practices. The newly sovereign state inherited colonial structures and regional divisions—ethnic, regional, and religious fault lines—that complicated governance from the outset. Against this backdrop, the country's political development can be read as a sequence of cycles: the rise of leaders and the attendant hopes for reform, followed too often by disappointment as corruption took root. This analysis proceeds in five parts: the colonial foundations and immediate post-independence dilemmas; the era of military rule and its persistent imprint on political culture; the systemic rhythms of corruption; an assessment of the Fourth Republic's democratic renewal and its unresolved problems; and the interplay between Nigeria's formal constitutional architecture and the informal realities that shape political life.

II. The Inherited State: Colonial Foundations And Post-Independence Challenges

The state that Nigeria received at independence bore deep colonial imprints. British rule had left administrative arrangements and political habits that were unevenly applied: the policy of indirect rule, especially pronounced in the North, co-opted traditional authorities to maintain order, while the southern regions—more exposed to Western education and missionary influence—developed a rising elite of professionals, activists, and intellectuals who pressed for greater participation. These divergent colonial practices entrenched regional differences and seeded political tension.

Constitutionally, power was devolved into a federal structure that recognized three regions—the Northern Region dominated by the Hausa-Fulani, the Western Region largely Yoruba, and the Eastern Region principally Igbo. Though meant to reflect diversity, this regional framework in practice institutionalised

regionalism and made ethnic identity a central axis of politics. The First Republic (1960–1966) began under a carefully arranged balance—Nnamdi Azikiwe as president and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as prime minister—but the partnership could not overcome structural cleavages. Regional rivalry, ethnic competition, and corrupt tendencies combined to erode the fragile arrangements of the early years and presaged the collapse of formal democratic rule.

III. Military Rule And Its Enduring Legacy On Nigerian Political Culture

From 1966 a succession of coups propelled the military into the commanding heights of Nigerian politics; the Armed Forces governed from 1966–1979 and again from 1983–1999. These decades of direct military rule profoundly reshaped political culture. Military governance concentrated decision-making, suppressed dissent, and personalised power—features that have continued to influence civilian politics where former military figures later reappeared as democratic leaders.

The transition of figures such as Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammadu Buhari, and Ibrahim Babangida from military rulers to players in civilian politics illustrates how authoritarian practices became entangled with democratic forms. The legacy of the era—frequent suspensions of constitutional rule, weakened accountability, and the filling of institutional vacuums by patronage and personal rule—left an enduring imprint. The breakdown of law and order in successive periods cannot be explained solely by defects in legal institutions; rather, it reflects corrupt practices that permeated politics and society and that eroded effective administration and progress.

IV. Corruption As A Systemic Challenge: Rhythms And Patterns

Corruption in Nigeria is not an episodic pathology but a structural feature that has inflected public life at every level under both military and civilian governments. Leaders have come to power pledging to eradicate graft, yet systemic incentives, weak institutions, and resource windfalls have repeatedly frustrated such pledges. The oil boom of the 1970s, instead of inaugurating broad prosperity, exacerbated graft as elites diverted national wealth for private enrichment—a classic manifestation of the resource curse.

The observation that “Nigeria is not suffering from poverty; it is suffering from the mismanagement of wealth” encapsulates a widely felt diagnosis: extensive resources have too often been squandered through rent-seeking and capture. In the democratic era corruption scandals—such as the Halliburton affair and the mismanagement of oil revenues—continued to corrode public confidence. These episodes underscore that the mere restoration of electoral procedures is insufficient to uproot deeply embedded patterns of clientelism, prebendalism, and fiscal mismanagement.

V. The Fourth Republic: Democratic Renewal And Persistent Challenges

The return to civilian rule in 1999 and the inauguration of the Fourth Republic offered a renewed hope that democratic institutions would bring transparency, accountability, and an end to endemic corruption. The Fourth Republic has been Nigeria’s longest sustained period of civilian governance and has seen peaceful transfers of power among multiple administrations—Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), Umaru Musa Yar’Adua (2007–2010), Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015), Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), and Bola Tinubu (elected 2023). These democratic transitions are significant achievements in a country long marked by military interruption.

Nevertheless, democratic continuity has not erased the persistence of corruption. Scandals and allegations have continued to undermine public trust. The election of President Bola Tinubu in 2023 was welcomed by some as an opportunity for renewal; yet his ascendancy was shadowed for many observers by longstanding allegations of corruption, raising doubts about the prospects for substantive reform. Thus the Fourth Republic reveals a paradox: electoral and procedural democracy has advanced, but the substantive transformation of governance and the cleansing of public life remain incomplete.

VI. Institutional Frameworks: Formal Structures And Informal Realities

Nigeria’s constitutional architecture establishes the familiar tripartite division of power—executive, legislature, and judiciary—intended to check and balance authority. The president, elected by universal suffrage, serves as head of state and government and as commander-in-chief, appointing the Federal Executive Council and exercising executive power within constitutional limits. The legislative branch, the National Assembly (composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate), is vested with law-making, investigatory, financial, confirmation, and impeachment powers. The constitution further distributes powers between the federation and the states and guarantees fundamental liberties, while limiting the presidency to two four-year terms.

Yet formal provisions coexist with robust informal practices that often subvert constitutional ideals. Political life in Nigeria is frequently shaped by networks of patronage, ethnic brokerage, and informal arrangements that frustrate development objectives. Scholars have argued that African politics can be structured in ways that impede development planning and the effective implementation of public programmes. In Nigeria,

this gap between constitutional design and lived practice helps explain why legal mechanisms alone have often proved inadequate to restrain predatory behaviour.

VII. Conclusion

The arc of Nigeria's political development since independence is complex and unresolved: a sequence of hopeful beginnings, military interludes, and democratic restorations repeatedly confronted by corruption, institutional fragility, and enduring social cleavages. The pattern is cyclical—leaders arise promising reform; institutions falter; corruption deepens; and new cycles begin. Contemporary challenges—economic inequality, insecurity, and the persistent hold of corrupt practices—remain pressing. Yet the Nigerian proverb endures as a measured counsel of hope: “No matter how long the night, the day is sure to come.”

Future progress depends on a dual strategy: strengthening formal institutions and transforming political culture. Technical reforms—robust accountability mechanisms, genuine electoral reform, and fiscal transparency—are necessary but insufficient unless accompanied by civic renewal: the emergence of shared political values that privilege public interest over private gain and ethnic aggrandisement. While the path forward is uncertain, the resilience of the Nigerian people and their continued commitment to democratic ideals provide grounds for cautious optimism.

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