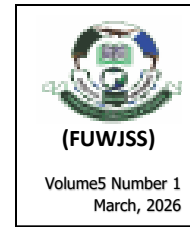


COLONIAL LEGACIES FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article critically examines the illusion of democracy in Nigeria, arguing that its postcolonial political system serves as a façade perpetuated by Western subjugation and elite manipulation, resulting in entrenched stagnation. Drawing on neocolonialism theory, which highlights external economic dependency, debt traps, geopolitical interference and elite theory, which underscores internal power concentration among a comprador ruling class, the study traces colonial legacies that imposed flawed governance models, leading to repeated democratic failure in Nigeria since 1960. It deconstructs sustaining mechanisms, including vote-buying, patronage networks, and complicit media and judiciary, while analysing Western roles via structural adjustment programmes, military aid, and diplomatic leverage that prioritise foreign interests over national development. The article concludes that colonial legacies in postcolonial Nigeria have resulted in deepened poverty, and institutional decay (evident in corruption and low public trust). Thus, the article advocates for grassroots mobilisation through popular education and social media, institutional reforms driven by enlightened mass action, economic sovereignty via domestic industrialisation, and geopolitical realignment towards autonomous partnerships to break dependency cycles and foster equitable progress.

Keywords: Democracy, Neocolonialism, sustainable development, poverty, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and now the fourth largest economy, has long been heralded as a democratic beacon on the continent. However, beneath the façade of regular elections and constitutional governance lies a deeply entrenched system of political stagnation, elite manipulation, and neocolonial subjugation. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria's democratic institutions have been undermined by military coups, electoral fraud, and systemic corruption, raising critical questions about the authenticity of its democracy (Adesoji, 2016; Page, 2018; LeVan & Ukata, 2018). Western powers, particularly former colonial rulers and global financial institutions, have played a significant role in perpetuating Nigeria's political dysfunction for their

geopolitical interests. Through economic conditionalities, covert interference, and the imposition of neoliberal policies, external actors have sustained a dependent political economy that prioritises foreign interests over genuine democratic development (Bangura, 2017; Ekanade, 2014; Ovidia, 2016; Obadare, 2018). The result is a pseudo-democracy where political power remains concentrated in the hands of a comprador elite, while the masses endure poverty, insecurity, and disenfranchisement (Madueke, 2025; Omotayo & Onuoha, 2025).

This article critically examines the façade of democracy in Nigeria, arguing that what exists is a carefully constructed illusion, one that benefits both the domestic elite and external Western interests while stifling genuine development. Nigeria's democratic framework was inherited from British colonial rule, which imposed a governance model ill-suited to the nation's socio-political realities (Adetiba, 2025). The postcolonial state, rather than fostering inclusive governance, became a vehicle for elite accumulation and neo-patrimonialism (Pitcher & Moran, 2015). Western powers, through economic and political leverage, have perpetuated this system by supporting regimes that align with their geopolitical and economic interests, thereby reinforcing dependency (Taylor, 2016). Consequently, Nigeria's stagnation is not merely a result of internal failures but also a product of continued neocolonial subjugation. This article seeks to analyse the historical and postcolonial foundations of Nigeria's democratic framework, tracing how colonial legacies shaped the current political structure. The article employed neocolonialism theory to analyse external domination and elite theory to scrutinise the role of Nigeria's ruling class in sustaining the status quo. By synthesising these perspectives, this article aims to expose the structural impediments to Nigeria's democratic consolidation and suggest actionable solutions for meaningful change.

Historical and Postcolonial Foundations of Nigeria's Democratic Institutions

The British colonial administration (1861–1960) established a governance framework primarily designed for administrative efficiency and resource extraction rather than democratic participation. This foundation created several structural distortions that persist in modern Nigeria (Archibong, 2018). A review of colonial origins suggests that the Nigerian state was initially conceived not as a nation-state but as a corporate entity. According to Maiangwa et al. (2018), the early colonial era was dominated by “exogenous planning” where institutions were modelled to serve British industrial needs. This led to a “company-state” mentality where public institutions were viewed as tools for elite

accumulation rather than public service (Maiangwa et al., 2018). Upon gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's founding elites largely preserved the colonial governance architecture, replacing British officials with indigenous ones rather than restructuring the state. The Westminster parliamentary system adopted at independence represented less a radical break from colonial governance than a continuation of its essential features with different personnel (Adetiba, 2025). This institutional transplantation occurred without adequate adaptation to Nigeria's socio-political realities, creating what Elaigwu (as cited in Shittu et al., 2025) describes as an "alien" concept of democracy that "needs to be domesticated to Nigeria's local conditions and targeted to its peculiar problems."

The First Republic (1963–1966) quickly revealed how colonial-era divisions could be exploited through ethnic clientelism and regional competition, leading to political instability (Osaghae, 1998; 2002; Archibong, 2018; 2019). The preservation of colonial administrative boundaries and a winner-takes-all political system ensured that competition remained a zero-sum struggle for state resources rather than a contest over developmental visions (LeVan & Ukata, 2018). The military eras spanning 1966–1979 and 1983–1999 entrenched these flaws, as colonial intolerance persisted in suppressing democratic movements (Adetiba, 2025). During these periods, the centralisation of power further eroded the independence of nascent institutions. Consequently, when Nigeria transitioned to the Second Republic (1979) and the Fourth Republic (1999), the new frameworks replicated colonial and military failings; corruption and elite pacts consistently overrode accountability (Campbell, 2022; LeVan, 2018). Neocolonial influences, often manifesting via Western-backed authoritarianism, stifled dissent while elites exploited federalism primarily for resource control (Yange, 2024; Chikwendu & Agbanyim, 2023).

This historical legacy has evolved into a fundamental tension in Nigeria's modern democracy: the maintenance of democratic appearances while remaining structurally constrained by external forces. Today, this neocolonial dynamic persists through several key mechanisms:

- Economic Dependency Structures: International financial institutions impose policy conditionalities that limit Nigeria's autonomy in economic governance (IMF, 2025).
- Corporate Penetration: Transnational corporations, particularly in extractive industries, exercise disproportionate influence over regulatory frameworks and resource governance (Okeke & Okeke, 2024; Watts & Zalik, 2020).
- Aid and Development Architecture: International development assistance often reinforces external policy priorities rather than

supporting locally determined pathways (Katumba, 2025; Business Day, 2024).

- Security Partnerships: International security cooperation frequently prioritises external interests over Nigeria's domestic security needs (Nzeribe & Imam, 2025; Targema & Moses, 2025).

The result of these persistent relationships is a system that pursues Western institutional forms without the sovereign power to adapt them to local realities. As Nigeria's experience illustrates, neocolonial dynamics can survive long after formal independence, constraining democratic sovereignty and perpetuating unequal global relationships that hinder genuine developmental progress.

Theoretical Framework

To comprehensively explain colonial legacies for democratic institutional failure in Nigeria, two theories, i.e. neocolonialism and elite theory, have been adopted for this study. The theories provide a structural and agency-based analysis of Nigeria's political economy, aligning with the objectives of this study. Neocolonialism emerged as a critical framework in the mid-20th century to describe the persistence of colonial exploitation after formal decolonisation. The term was first coined by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in 1956 and later popularised by former Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah in his seminal 1965 work, "Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism". Rooted in the context of African decolonisation, the concept gained traction at the 1961 All African People's Conference, where it was defined as a system of indirect domination through economic, political, and cultural means, perpetuating dependency on former colonial powers. Nkrumah argued that while African nations achieved nominal independence, their economies and policies operate through indirect mechanisms such as economic dependency, foreign aid conditionalities, and geopolitical influence, directed by external actors, ensuring continued exploitation (Nkrumah, 1965). The theory drew from Marxist critiques of capitalism, particularly Lenin's (1916) analysis of imperialism, and Fanon's (1961) anti-colonial thought shaped by postcolonial realities where structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and conditional aid replaced direct military rule. In Nigeria, this framework explains how Western powers and global financial institutions sustain a façade of democracy while perpetuating underdevelopment.

The theory operates on several core assumptions:

- Economic Dependency: Former colonies remain structurally dependent on former colonisers through trade imbalances, foreign debt, and corporate monopolies (Rodney, 1972).

- Political Puppetry: Western powers install and sustain compliant local elites who serve foreign interests over national development (Ake, 1996).
- Cultural Imperialism: Global media, education, and institutions propagate Western norms, eroding indigenous governance models (Said, 1993).
- Military-Industrial Control: Arms sales and military alliances ensure neocolonial states remain politically unstable and reliant on Western security (Chomsky, 1999; Stavrianakis, 2025).

The strengths of neocolonialism lie in its explanatory power, providing a critical framework for understanding post-colonial global dynamics.

- The theory offers explanations for continued global inequality by providing a compelling account of why many formally independent nations have remained economically dependent and underdeveloped. It argues that the end of colonial rule did not eliminate the power imbalances between nations (Nkrumah, 1965; Amin, 1976; Obikwelu, et al. 2023).
- Again, the theory highlights the role of non-military control as it identifies and analyses the subtle, indirect ways in which former colonial powers and powerful nations maintain influence. These include economic means (debt, trade agreements), political pressures, and cultural domination, which operate without direct military or political occupation (Amin, 1976).
- The theory also focuses on unequal economic relations by effectively exposing how institutions and systems like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and multinational corporations can act to perpetuate unequal trade relations and economic dependency (Nkrumah, 1965).

Despite its explanatory power, the theory has been heavily criticised for its analytical limitations. Critics argue that the theory oversimplifies the problem of underdevelopment by focusing almost exclusively on external factors. It is often faulted for downplaying or ignoring the significant role of internal issues like poor governance, widespread corruption, political instability, and internal conflicts within developing nations (Taylor, 2016).

- Neocolonialism is often criticised for lack of agency as it portrays developing countries as passive victims with little ability to change their circumstances. Furthermore, it has been faulted for being better at diagnosing the problem of underdevelopment than at offering concrete, practical policy prescriptions for a way forward (Todaro & Smith, 2020; Taylor, 2016).

- The theory also suffers from empirical contradictions as the economic rise of countries like China and South Korea serves as a major challenge to the theory's core tenets. These nations achieved rapid growth by strategically engaging with, rather than delinking from, the global capitalist system, which contradicts the neocolonialism theory's advocacy for self-reliance (Gulati, 2023; Taylor, 2016).

Neocolonialism theory sees Nigeria's political system as an illusion of sovereignty, with the country reduced to a "political satellite" of Western powers through elite complicity. During decolonisation, colonial strategies ensured the emergence of a regime aligned with foreign interests, as evidenced by British Colonial Secretary Ian Macleod's 1960 statement framing independence as a transition to trade-based influence rather than true autonomy. This fosters a comprador elite that exploits ethnic divisions for power, undermining national cohesion and democratic governance (Attah, 2013).

Critiques of neocolonialism have, however, highlighted the theory's overemphasis on external factors, neglecting internal agency and elite complicity. In Nigeria, local elites act as "compradors", colluding with foreign capital through tax evasions (e.g., Elder Dempster Lines) and undervalued privatisations (e.g., WARCO shares sold for \$363,300 vs \$1,560,000 market value), suggesting underdevelopment stems partly from domestic choices rather than solely neo-colonial structures (Attah, 2013).

Elite theory emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the works of Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), and later C. Wright Mills (1916–1962). These scholars challenged classical democratic ideals by arguing that power in all societies is inevitably concentrated in the hands of a small, self-perpetuating minority (Drochon, 2020). Pareto introduced the concept of "circulation of elites", where ruling groups maintain dominance through force or persuasion (Pareto, 1935). Mosca, for his part, theorised the "political class", arguing that organised minorities always dominate disorganised majorities (Mosca, 1939). While Mills applied elite theory to post-war America, identifying a "power elite" of corporate, military, and political leaders (Mills, 1956).

These foundational works challenged classical democratic ideals by demonstrating how power concentrates among small groups regardless of political systems (Drochon, 2020).

In Nigeria, elite theory helps explain how a small ruling class comprising political, military, and business elites controls state resources while excluding the masses (Ekundayo, 2017).

The theory rests on several core propositions:

- Power Concentration: All societies are ruled by a minority elite, regardless of political system (Michels, 1911).
- Elite Cohesion: Ruling groups share common interests and collaborate to maintain dominance (Domhoff, 2014).
- Mass Apathy: The majority of citizens are politically passive or manipulated (Schumpeter, 1942).
- Institutional Control: Elites dominate key institutions (e.g., media, judiciary) to legitimise their rule (Dahl, 1961). In Nigeria, these assumptions manifest in “godfatherism” in politics (e.g., Tinubu’s influence over Lagos politics since 1999) as well as the military–civilian elite pacts that protect mutual interests (Adesoji, 2016; Adebowale & Ojo, 2023).

One core strength of elite theory lies in its explanatory power. The theory effectively explains how democratic systems can mask elite domination (Dahl, 1961; Jackson, 2022). Again, the theory reveals mechanisms of power maintenance through institutional control (Domhoff, 2014). Another major strength of the theory is highlighted in its empirical validation, as it is supported by studies of corporate–political networks (Mills, 1956). This is confirmed by research on policy-making processes (Gilens & Page, 2014). The theory is also practically applicable. It is useful for analysing political corruption and state capture (Bagg, 2024). It also helps to explain persistent inequality in democratic systems (Piketty, 2018).

A major weakness of the theory is that it is theoretically limited. It overemphasises elite unity while ignoring intra-elite conflicts (Jackson, 2022). Again, it underestimates mass political agency and social movements (Damele & Campos, 2022). The theory is also critiqued for its methodological issues as it is difficult to empirically identify and measure elite influence (Khan, 2020). The theory often relies on circular reasoning about power (Femia, 2022). The theory also suffers from normative concerns due to its potentially undemocratic implications (Magalhães, 2022). It also lacks clear prescriptive solutions (Drochon, 2020; Piano, 2022).

Elite theory reinforces the position of neocolonialism on Nigeria by describing the system as “polito-cracy”, where a narrow group comprising politicians, military figures, and business leaders dominates, with unclear regime transitions allowing autocratic elites to re-emerge in democratic guises. This paradox creates political instability, as elites prioritise self-preservation over public welfare, exemplified by godfatherism and exclusionary politics that alienate citizens (Momodu & Lawal, 2025).

Elites theory application in Nigeria is critiqued for underplaying external influences, such as Western support for coups (e.g., US recognition of Babangida), which intersect with elite actions (Maro, 2025).

Colonial Legacies and the Imposition of a Flawed Governance Model

Nigeria's democratic framework is deeply rooted in its colonial past, where British imperial rule (1900–1960) imposed a centralised administrative structure designed for resource extraction rather than participatory governance (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Using the indirect rule system headed by Lugard, after the amalgamation of the country in 1914, the British governed through traditional elites (e.g., emirs in the North), reinforcing authoritarian hierarchies that have persisted today (Mamdani, 1996; Onyambayi et al., 2024). Nigeria's amalgamation in 1914 also brought together disparate ethnic groups under a single polity, fostering deep-seated divisions that have continued to undermine democratic consolidation (Adetiba, 2025). The colonial state was structured to serve imperial economic interests, with little regard for democratic principles (Pierce, 2022). Electoral exclusion was common as only 4% of Nigerians (mostly educated elites) could vote in the 1922 Clifford Constitution, entrenching elite dominance (Osaghae, 2018). Regional fragmentation, which was included in the 1946 Richards Constitution, divided Nigeria into North, East, and West, institutionalising ethnic politics (Agbibo, 2019). Mohammed et al. (2020) note that the 1960 independence constitution retained colonial-era federalism, which exacerbated regional rivalries. The civil service, judiciary, and military remained structurally unchanged, preserving colonial governance norms (Fasakin, 2021).

Nigeria's democratic experiments repeatedly collapsed due to colonial legacies and elite manipulation. The First Nigerian Republic (1960–1966) was a critical period marked by the transition from colonial rule to independence, but it was also fraught with political instability, ethnic divisions, and suppression of opposition under Western-aligned leaders like Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Gberevbie & Oni, 2021). The federal structure entrenched ethnic divisions, with the Northern People's Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), and Action Group (AG) competing along regional lines (Suberu, 2022). The 1964 federal elections and 1965 Western Region elections were marred by rigging and violence, delegitimising democracy (Adetiba, 2025). The elections exposed the fragility of Nigeria's post-colonial democracy, where regionalism, corruption, and electoral malpractice created a vacuum filled by military intervention. As historian Siollun (2019) notes, the coup was not merely a power grab but a systemic

response to a “decaying political order”. These events underscore the enduring challenges of governance in ethnically diverse societies and the dangers of electoral illegitimacy. The electoral malpractices and political violence culminated in the 1966 military coup, ending Nigeria’s first democratic experiment.

Nigeria’s military rule, spanning nearly three decades (1966–1979, 1983–1999), was characterised by factional coups and authoritarian governance, further weakening democratic norms by suppressing democratic aspirations, dissent, manipulating constitutions, and entrenching corruption (Adekunle & Joseph, 2021). The British colonial legacy, particularly in structuring the military, played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of power struggles, while elite interference repeatedly derailed attempts at civilian governance.

The first military coup in January 1966, led by junior officers like Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, targeted Northern political leaders, including Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa and Northern Premier Ahmadu Bello. This coup, though justified as anti-corruption, was perceived as ethnically biased (Igbo officers dominated the plot), triggering a Northern-led counter-coup in July 1966 that killed General Aguiyi-Ironsi and installed Yakubu Gowon as head of state. The military’s British-style training emphasised loyalty to rank and regional identities, deepening divides. For example, the 1975 coup against Gowon was orchestrated by officers who resented his centralisation of power, while the 1983 coup that ousted President Shagari was framed as a “corrective measure” against civilian corruption. Ethnic and institutional rivalries were a common feature, as the military’s structure allowed regional blocs (e.g., Northern-dominated Supreme Military Council) to dominate, marginalising Southern officers and perpetuating cycles of violence (Paul & Ambrose, 2022). Despite the return to civilian rule in 1999, military-era elites retained significant influence, ensuring continuity of undemocratic practices.

Deconstructing the Mechanisms Sustaining Democratic Institutions in Nigeria

Nigeria’s democracy operates as a façade, where formal institutions exist but substantive democratic governance remains elusive. Despite regular elections and constitutional provisions, the system is sustained by mechanisms that prioritise and legitimise external influence and internal oligarchy across electoral, elite collusion, media and judicial complicity over popular sovereignty. These mechanisms, together with external legitimisation, demonstrate how they collectively sustain Nigeria’s democratic illusion (LeVan, & Ukata, 2018; Madueke, 2025). The

mechanisms are interwoven and reinforce each other to collectively maintain the status quo.

Electoral manipulation has existed in Nigeria since independence and is a foundational mechanism for sustaining a façade of democracy while subverting its core principle: the will of the people. This goes beyond simple fraud to include systemic flaws that create an unlevel playing field.

The electoral process is routinely undermined by vote-buying and voter intimidation as politicians deploy financial inducements and thuggery to influence voters (Bekoe, 2012). Similarly, Omotola (2010) noted that institutional fraud by electoral bodies like INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission) often fails to ensure credible elections due to political interference and external legitimisation. Electoral farces including the 2007, 2019 and 2023 elections received international condemnation but were still recognised by Western powers (EU EOM, 2019 & 2023), to maintain strategic interests. The 2007 elections, for example, were widely condemned as the “worst in Nigeria’s history” (EU Observer Mission, 2007), while the 2019 elections saw over 1,000 deaths linked to political violence (CDD, 2019), yet the US and UK quickly endorsed all of them (Adebajo, 2010; Punch, 2023; Premium Times, 2023).

Furthermore, technological subversion is another mechanism employed. While bodies like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have introduced technology to enhance credibility, a lack of transparency and legal ambiguity can lead to its subversion. The legal challenges surrounding the use of technology like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) have created loopholes that can be exploited, casting doubt on the final results and allowing for the legal defence of questionable outcomes (Acheampong, 2023; Ifeanyi-Ajufo & Hoffmann, 2023; DiA, 2023).

Nigeria’s political landscape is often characterised by a lack of ideological difference between the main polities (Babalola, 2024). This contributes to the illusion of choice, while power is effectively circulated among a small, interconnected political elite. Political power rotation (zoning) between North and South creates an illusion of fairness while excluding grassroots participation (Madueke, 2025). For example, 94% of Nigeria’s National Assembly members are millionaires, indicating elite entrenchment, while the PDP and APC (the two dominant parties) operate like two sides of a coin, alternating power without ideological distinction (Ojo, 2021). Furthermore, patrimonialism and patronage are rooted in the political system where political power is used to distribute state resources to loyalists for personal and political gain. This system fosters a culture of patronage and elite collusion, where politicians can switch parties with

ease, knowing that their access to resources and influence is maintained regardless of their political affiliation. Patronage networks also ensure that only loyalists gain political appointments, reinforcing a prebendal system (Joseph, 1987). Smith (2007), reiterating the persistence of colonial legacies as well as patron–client relationships, observed that elite “godfathers” (e.g., Tinubu, Atiku and co.) continue to control party nominations and electoral outcomes.

Relatedly, this collusion ensures that there is little to no accountability for corruption or policy failures. Members of the political elite are rarely prosecuted, and even when a party loses power, its key figures often retain their influence or simply join the new ruling party (Guardian, 2023), thereby sustaining the illusion of change without altering the underlying power structures.

The media and the judiciary, two pillars of any democracy, are often critiqued for their complicity in perpetuating the illusion. These institutions are, in fact, regarded by many as the guardians of the illusion.

In Nigeria, media complicity and manufactured consent is a common tactic employed. The media, rather than serving as a watchdog, often legitimises the democratic illusion by self-censorship due to their ownership. Many major media houses are owned by powerful politicians or business tycoons with political connections (e.g., ThisDay, owned by a former minister; and Premium Times & Sahara Reporters, funded by Omidyar Network, an entity alleged to be affiliated to the CIA) (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2017; Adetola et al., 2024; Hundeyin, 2025). This has led to a prevalence of sponsored content (often termed “cash-for-news”), a decline in rigorous investigative journalism, and a lack of critical scrutiny of the political elite (ICIR, 2020; Premium Times, 2018). The result is a media environment that often serves as a propaganda tool rather than a public watchdog, thereby sustaining the illusion of a free press.

The judiciary is seen by many as the final arbiter of electoral disputes, yet it has also faced accusations of complicity (Hoffmann, 2024). Judicial interference and the legalisation of illegitimacy is a common mechanism utilised. Nigeria’s judiciary, instead of upholding democratic integrity, is often weaponised to overturn or affirm election results based on technicalities rather than merit and in favour of the highest bidder or preferred interest (e.g., Kogi, Imo, and Bayelsa 2019 governorship rulings as well as the 2023 presidential election petitions ruling) (PLAC, 2025; Vanguard, 2024; The New York Times, 2023; NJC, 2023; Premium Times, 2020). Rulings that are perceived as inconsistent or politically motivated can undermine public trust and ultimately legitimise electoral fraud, thereby upholding the façade of a democratic system.

The Role of Western Institutions in Perpetuating Nigeria's Stagnation

Nigeria presents a paradox of a resource-rich nation facing persistent economic stagnation and developmental challenges. While internal factors like corruption and poor governance are widely cited, empirical analysis reveals that this stagnation is also a product of continued Western subjugation, a process that has evolved from direct colonialism to more subtle forms of control. This analysis focuses on three key areas of subjugation: economic policies, military interventions, and diplomatic leverage.

1. *Economic Policies: The Debt Trap and Structural Adjustment:* Empirical evidence suggests that Western economic policies and financial institutions have played a significant role in limiting Nigeria's economic sovereignty and driving a cycle of debt. The primary mechanism for this has been the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Structural Adjustment Programme introduced in 1986 promoted privatisation and trade liberalisation that increased poverty and dependency, with manufacturing GDP declining, spiralling inflation, and unemployment surges (Onuoha, 2023). For example, privatisation under leaders like Obasanjo (1999–2007) sold assets like the national railway to foreign entities, causing job losses that also exacerbated poverty and entrenched dependency (Stephen et al., 2016; Eke & Chiazor, 2017). These reforms, influenced by external powers, weakened democratic institutions by prioritising foreign debt servicing over public welfare, consuming over 80% of national revenue and pauperising the masses (BudgIT Foundation, 2025, May 7). More recently, Nigeria's public debt escalated from N12.6 trillion in 2015 to N121.67 trillion in 2024 (DMO, 2015; DMO, 2024), illustrating how neocolonial debt mechanisms limit fiscal sovereignty and democratic accountability, as policies like fuel subsidy removal, Naira devaluation, electricity tariff hikes and the 5% fuel tax under the Tinubu administration align with IMF conditionalities, exacerbating inflation and economic crises (IMF, 2022; World Bank, 2023; CBN, 2025; West Africa Weekly, 2025; Business Day, 2025). For a country that cannot generate 6,000 megawatts of reliable electricity for its over 200 million people, and which happens to have some of the world's largest and cheapest fossil energy reserves, why would it not be able to produce affordable fuel for its citizens, let alone tax its consumption when it is already unaffordable to the vast majority of the population.

These IMF/World Bank conditionalities have exacerbated the problem of resource colonialism, as oil revenues estimated at \$45.6B in 2022 were

extracted by Shell/Chevron, etc., with minimal local benefit (Yange, 2024). The Petroleum Industry Act (2021) that should have addressed some of these anomalies still favours multinational corporations over the host communities (Obi, 2022).

2. Military and Security Influence: While direct military intervention has been rare since the colonial era, Western powers maintain a strong presence through military aid, arms sales, and strategic partnerships. This creates a form of security dependency that can subordinate Nigeria's military objectives to Western geopolitical interests.

The United States, France, and other European nations are key suppliers of military hardware and training to the Nigerian Armed Forces. These relationships, as documented by reports from institutions like the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2025; US Department of State, 2025), are often accompanied by conditions that can influence Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies. For instance, the terms of arms sales can dictate how and when the equipment is used (i.e., the US sale of A-29 Super Tucano jets to Nigeria in 2018), which can be perceived as an infringement on military sovereignty (The Nation, 2022; Sahara Reporters, 2022).

Furthermore, Western military and diplomatic interests in the Sahel region, driven by counter-terrorism concerns, have led to increased foreign military presence and joint exercises with Nigerian forces. This strategic alignment, as analysed in academic papers on West African security, can mean that Nigeria's fight against groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP is influenced by the priorities of its foreign partners, rather than being a purely national security endeavour (Obasi, 2018). For example, in 2023 after the coup d'état that overthrew the government of Mohamed Bazoum in Niger, ECOWAS led by Nigeria's president, Bola Tinubu, set a deadline for the junta to give up power—or face possible military action. The war was only averted due to strong opposition from Nigerian lawmakers representing states along the more than 1,500 km (930 mile) border with Niger, and a countrywide condemnation of the possibility of war (BBC, 2023). All of this was happening at the same time that Niger had ordered France and the US military to leave the country (The SOAS Spirit, 2023; The New York Times, 2024). The question begging for answers is, whose interest would have been served had Nigeria been plunged into a war with its long-time peaceful neighbour, Niger?

3. Diplomatic Leverage and Foreign Aid: Additionally, diplomatic leverage, often exerted through the conditioning of foreign aid and international development programmes, is another key mechanism of

influence. These programmes are often critiqued for advancing Western political and economic ideals under the guise of democracy promotion.

The programmes of development agencies like USAID, DFID and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in Nigeria are a matter of public record. While their official websites and reports outline their goals, which often include strengthening civil society, promoting human rights, and supporting electoral processes, critical analysis from scholars and civil society actors often highlights the potential for these well-intentioned programmes to have unintended consequences or to be used to influence political outcomes. For example, a BBC Media Action leaked document revealed United Kingdom (UK) government-funded radio drama ‘Story Story’ to influence Nigerian voters during the 2015 general election (West Africa Weekly, 2025; The Grayzone, 2025). This is usually done to subtly shape the political landscape by favouring certain political outcomes and entrenching a class of “pro-Western elites” who are amenable to external interests.

Furthermore, influence through diplomatic engagements can also exert pressure on Nigeria’s governance and legal systems. International bodies and foreign governments can use the threat of sanctions or the promise of aid to push for policies that may not align with the immediate needs or cultural context of the Nigerian people. For example, a West Africa Weekly news report revealed that the National Assembly, the legislative arm of the government, listed several entities linked to foreign intelligence agencies and private foreign interests like the Gates Foundation as its “development partners”. Such partnerships, under the cover of civil society and development work, amount to direct foreign interference in Nigeria’s internal affairs. In addition to direct involvement in Nigeria’s governance processes, these foreign actors also provide funding to local civil society groups which act as their proxies in a complex political astroturfing operation that ultimately shapes laws that govern all aspects of the lives of Nigerians (West Africa Weekly, 2025). Similarly, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), launched by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations, a foreign-funded initiative posturing as a philanthropic organisation aimed at improving food security in Africa, has through its significant financial influence, embedded itself in Nigeria’s policymaking process to steer seed and plant variety laws in favour of foreign corporate interests and patented seeds.

This external interference undermines Nigeria’s self-determination by prioritising a corporate-driven agricultural model that benefits multinational agribusinesses over local farmers. The result has been a failure to achieve food security or improve livelihoods, instead increasing hunger, farmer costs, and dependency on expensive external inputs (West

Africa Weekly, 2025). Ultimately, these cases exemplify how foreign-funded initiatives can masquerade as development aid while effectively coercing national policy, threatening food sovereignty, and locking countries into a cycle of dependency that serves external agendas rather than local needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of Nigeria's political landscape reveals that the nation's democratic framework is less a functional system of popular sovereignty and more a carefully constructed façade. Rooted in colonial legacies, the current state remains a vehicle for resource extraction and elite accumulation rather than inclusive governance (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Adetiba, 2025). This study has deconstructed how the "illusion of democracy" is sustained through a synergy of internal elite theory and external neocolonialism. Internal mechanisms, such as godfatherism, institutionalised electoral fraud, and a complicit judiciary, ensure that power remains concentrated within a narrow "polito-cracy" (Momodu & Lawal, 2025; Adebawale & Ojo, 2023). Simultaneously, Western subjugation remains a potent force. Through debt traps, with public debt skyrocketing from N12.6 trillion in 2015 to N121.67 trillion in 2024 (DMO, 2024), and the imposition of IMF/World Bank conditionalities, Nigeria's fiscal sovereignty has been surrendered to global financial interests (Onuoha, 2023; West Africa Weekly, 2025).

Furthermore, the influence of foreign-funded NGOs and "development partners" linked to intelligence agencies suggests a deep-seated digital and policy neocolonialism that shapes Nigeria's laws to favour multinational corporate interests over local needs (West Africa Weekly, 2025). Ultimately, Nigeria's stagnation is a product of a non-reciprocal flow of wealth, where the comprador elite collaborates with Western powers to maintain a "periphery" status in the global world-system (Rodney, 1972).

To dismantle this façade and achieve genuine democratic development, the following actions are recommended: Grassroots mobilisation: This is a crucial pathway for political change in Nigeria, yet its effectiveness is consistently undermined by a fundamental challenge: a large segment of the population lacks the critical awareness to identify the root causes of their socio-political and economic struggles. This lack of enlightenment makes them susceptible to manipulation by a small, interconnected political elite. This elite class exploits pre-existing social cleavages, weaponising religion, ethnicity, and identity politics to divide the populace, stifle collective action, and maintain their grip on power (Nwoye & Uwa, 2025). Given these challenges, a new approach is

imperative. The initial step towards meaningful grassroots mobilisation must be a sustained and systemic popular education campaign. This campaign should not be a continuation of the flawed traditional education system but should instead focus on enlightening the masses about the true sources of their challenges: the intersecting forces of neocolonialism and internal elite subjugation.

Social media emerges as a critical tool in this effort. Its widespread adoption, particularly among Nigeria's large youth population, offers a platform to circumvent traditional, compromised media outlets and directly engage the populace. By leveraging the power of the social media platforms, community mobilisers can systematically and consistently push content that educates the populace on the root causes of their poverty and disenfranchisement. This sustained enlightenment is the necessary precursor to effective grassroots action, enabling citizens to transcend the manipulated divisions of ethnicity and religion and unify for genuine systemic change.

Institutional Reforms: Institutional reforms are crucial for national development, yet they are rarely initiated by the very elites who benefit from the status quo. Consequently, genuine institutional change is often dependent on pressure from an enlightened populace. However, this creates a paradox: mass action is most potent when the people are aware of the socio-political and geopolitical forces at play, a level of awareness that is itself a casualty of the dysfunctional system.

Mass action, when driven by a socio-politically and geopolitically aware populace, has the power to force genuine institutional change. The 2015 election is a case in point, as it represented a "critical juncture" where citizens, frustrated with corruption and instability, chose to replace the ruling party. However, as the provided text argues, the choice was not fully informed by a deep understanding of the systemic issues. This is empirically evidenced by the country's subsequent economic trajectory (World Bank, 2025).

Ultimately, for Nigeria to achieve meaningful institutional reform, the populace must be empowered with the knowledge to demand and sustain genuine change. This requires a systemic effort to promote critical thinking and awareness, transforming mass action from a reaction to a catalyst for a fundamental shift in institutional direction.

Economic Sovereignty: Breaking the cycle of dependency requires a conscious and deliberate political will from a quality and intentional leadership. A patriotic leadership understands the international economic order and is committed to prioritising national development over external prescriptions. This is exemplified by countries that have successfully charted an independent economic course, demonstrating that a strong,

unified political will is the key to overcoming neocolonial pressures. For example, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a powerful case study (The Conversation, 2020). Similarly, China's rise to a global economic power is often cited as a result of its long-term, state-led development model that carefully managed its engagement with the international economy. By prioritising national interests and strategic control over key industries, China has avoided many of the pitfalls of a purely free-market approach advocated by Western institutions (Adisu, 2014).

For Nigeria to achieve true economic growth and break free from neocolonial and elite exploitation, it must move away from being a mere supplier of raw materials. This requires the emergence of a leadership that is willing to:

- Prioritise Domestic Industrialisation: Shift away from a resource-export economy to one that adds value through local manufacturing.
- Control Key Sectors: Safeguard critical industries from foreign control and ensure that they serve national development goals.
- Invest in a Diversified Economy: Look beyond the oil sector to develop agriculture, technology, and other sectors that can create jobs and ensure sustained, broad-based growth.

This approach, grounded in a clear-eyed understanding of global economic dynamics and driven by a patriotic and intentional leadership, is the key to unlocking Nigeria's full economic potential and building a truly sovereign state.

The pursuit of geopolitical autonomy is a critical pathway for Nigeria to address neocolonial and elite subjugation. The concept of "non-alignment", while historically significant, has proven to be an illusion, as countries, regardless of their public stance, are subject to the pressures in a world increasingly defined by competing spheres of influence. The case of India, a leading figure in the Non-Aligned Movement, serves as a powerful example. Despite its economic and military stature, India has faced diplomatic and political pressure from the United States regarding its relationship with Russia, particularly its continued purchase of Russian oil and its involvement in the BRICS economic bloc (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This demonstrates that even large, ostensibly non-aligned nations are not immune to the demands of geopolitical alignment.

The history of Africa's relationship with the West provides a compelling argument against the notion of equitable partnership. The fates of prominent Pan-African leaders who advocated for economic and political autonomy such as Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, and Muammar Gaddafi are often cited as cautionary tales. Their overthrow, assassination, or death in conflict is widely attributed by

scholars to the involvement of Western intelligence and military forces that sought to protect neocolonial interests and maintain control over resources (Pambazuka Press, 2021). For example, the Lobito Corridor rail line from Angola to the Democratic Republic of Congo (Brookings Institution, 2022) demonstrates the type of extractive infrastructure projects that Western-led initiatives often focus on—facilitating the export of minerals rather than building broad-based, transformative industrial capacity on the continent.

In recent years, some nations in the Sahel, such as Niger and Burkina Faso, have initiated a geopolitical realignment to assert their autonomy. These countries have severed security and economic ties with France and the United States and have instead forged new partnerships. For instance, Niger has established a landmark agreement with Russia to explore and develop its uranium resources, a move aimed at boosting its energy sovereignty. This decision marks a significant shift from its previous arrangement, where France largely benefited from the country's uranium deposits (International Crisis Group, 2024). Nigeria's long-standing partnership with the West has failed to produce the transformative development that the country needs. Despite billions of dollars spent on rehabilitating state-owned refineries, electricity power generation and distribution as well as a continuous stream of foreign aid, the nation's infrastructure, particularly in the energy sector, remains in a state of decay.

In contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with its focus on infrastructure development, offers an alternative model of engagement. While Nigeria has participated in some projects, a broader geopolitical realignment to fully embrace such partnerships has been hindered by its traditional alliance with the West (The Diplomat, 2023). For Nigeria to achieve its full potential, a strategic shift in foreign policy is non-negotiable, and such a change must be driven by an intentional leadership and an enlightened populace that understands these global dynamics.

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