# POLITICAL MARKETPLACE AND YOUTH SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

This paper examines 'politics as an economy' in Nigeria, where political power and participation serves as a major avenue for wealth accumulation, resource distribution, and economic survival. While existing scholarship largely focuses on elite capture, prebendal practices, patronage, and rent-seeking, the study extends the analysis to unemployed youths and economically marginalized populations who increasingly engage in politics as a livelihood strategy. The study integrates prebendalism, political marketplace, rent-seeking, rational choice, and institutional perspectives to explain the interaction between elite accumulation and mass survival. With qualitative political economy research design adoption, using historical-analytical and descriptive approaches, the study draws on secondary data from scholarly literature, government and institutional publications, election reports, policy documents, and credible media sources, and these were content analyzed. Drawing on those perspectives shaped by the political economy and institutional viewpoints, particularly engaging the works of Richard Joseph, Peter Ekeh, Claude Ake, and Douglass North, the paper argues that Nigeria operates as a political marketplace in which access to public office and political networks creates opportunities for economic gain. Findings established that politics in Nigeria functions as both an elite accumulation system and a mass survival economy. Institutional weaknesses, historical legacies, unemployment, and elite behaviour sustain this system, with adverse implications for governance, democracy and development. The paper concludes that meaningful transformation of politics from an economic enterprise into a public-service institution requires institutional reform/strengthening, economic restructuring/diversification, productive employment, electoral finance reform/laws, reduced dependence on political patronage, and sustainable youth empowerment.

**Keywords:**Politics, political patronage, prebendalism, youth unemployment

## Introduction

In Nigeria, politics has evolved into a central economic arena where access to state power and association with elites with state power translates into access to opportunities and wealth. Essentially, it has developed into a primary avenue for economic accumulation and social mobility. Rather than serving solely as a mechanism of governance for all and for development, political office has become deeply intertwined with economic survival and personal/group advancement. Politics in Nigeria has change beyond its conventional role of governance into a central economic arena of economic acquisition. Rather than serving primarily as a platform for public service, politics and political office are widely perceived as a strategic avenue for wealth accumulation and for others, improving life chances.

While this dynamic has traditionally been analyzed from the perspective of elite competition, there is growing evidence that politics also serves as a means of survival for ordinary citizens, particularly youths, marginalized groups and the unemployed masses. This reality has led scholars to conceptualize Nigerian politics as an economic system in itself. Scholars such as Bayart (1993), Chabal & Daloz (1999), and de Waal (2015) have also argued that in many African states, politics functions as a marketplace in which political loyalty, patronage, and access to state resources are exchanged for economic advantage. Bayart's (1993) notion of the 'politics of the belly' particularly captures how state power in Africa often becomes instrumentalized for accumulation and redistribution among networks of clients and supporters. Specifically, in Nigeria, this kind of politics is commonly depicted as politics of stomach infrastructure.

As Claude Ake (1981) observes, the intensity of political struggle in Africa reflects the centrality of the state as a source of economic resources. It indicates that political competition in Africa is intense because control of the state equates to control of wealth. In Nigeria's contemporary context, this struggle is no longer confined to elites such as political elites, ethnic elites or religious elites, it has permeated broader segments of society in forms such as ethnic politics, religious politics, gender politics and youth politics, all competing in the same political space, where participation in political processes whether formal or informal offer pathways to income, mobility, social recognition, religious privileges, and ethnic privileges. This logic has expanded beyond elites to include unemployed youths and economically marginalized citizens, who increasingly view politics as a means of livelihood.

The recent political developments also reveal that Nigerian youths are not merely passive beneficiaries of patronage systems but increasingly active political actors. Studies on the #EndSARS protests and the Obidient Movement demonstrate how digital activism has transformed youth political consciousness and participation in Nigeria (Onayinka et al., 2026; Omotayo, 2023). While these movements indicate the eroding of the notion of 'politics as a dirty' or 'politics as a dirty game', the movements also indicated the emergence of digitally mediated forms of political engagement that challenge traditional patronage structures while simultaneously exposing the frustrations of economically marginalized youths. This lends to digital space as a new political marketplace for the youths.

In the context where the state is the main source of wealth, the intense competition to acquire and control state power in order to control such wealth (Ake,1981) indicate that capturing political power becomes synonymous with capturing economic opportunities such as employment and appointment opportunities. Recent socio-economic realities reinforce these shifts, to the extent that the Nigeria's unemployment rate stood at approximately 5.3% in early 2024, with youth unemployment significantly higher at 8.4% among ages 15–24 (NBS, 2024; Africa Check, 2025; Premium Times (2025). However, broader assessments suggest a deeper crisis, with estimates indicating that tens of millions of Nigerian youths remain unemployed or underemployed (NBS, 2024; Africa Check, 2025; Premium Times (2025). These conditions have made political participation formal and informal an attractive economic alternative for the mass of unemployed and underemployed. This paper explores how and why politics functions as an economy in Nigeria and the consequences of this phenomenon for governance and development.

To achieve this, the paper is present in two broad sequences: first focused theoretical perspective and methodology, and second focus on analysis on political economy, survival logic and institutional incentives, prebendalism beyond elites and the logic of public office, the two publics, moral economy and social legitimacy, historical roots of politics as an economy in Nigeria, youth unemployment and the turn to politics as an economy,mechanisms of politics as a mass and elite economy,implications for governance, development, and society, towards a reframed understanding of politics as an economy, policy implications and reform strategies, and conclusion.

## Political Economy, Survival Logic and Institutional Incentives in Nigeria

The framework of political economy provides a useful lens for understanding the intersection of politics and economics. This framework of political economy explains how institutional arrangements shape economic behavior. Therefore, from the insights of the political economy, economic behavior is shaped by institutional incentives. North (1990) also stressed that institutions shape incentives in human interaction, and where institutions are weak or extractive, actors are incentivized to pursue personal gain through political means rather than productive economic activity. Consequently, North further argues that individuals respond rationally to the opportunities and constraints created by institutions. In Nigeria, where formal economic opportunities are limited, politics becomes an alternative economic space.

This argument aligns with the rational choice institutionalism of Olson (1993), who argues that weak institutional arrangements encourage 'roving bandit' behavior among political actors seeking short-term extraction rather than long-term productive governance. Williamson (1985) also emphasizes that institutional weakness increases transaction costs and encourages opportunistic behavior, corruption, and rent-seeking. North have also emphasized that weak institutions incentivize individuals to pursue wealth through political channels rather than productive enterprise. Similarly, Acemoglu & Robinson (2012, 2002, 2001) argue that extractive institutions enable elites to monopolize resources, creating incentives for political capture. In this context, Acemoglu & Robinson further argue that extractive political institutions enable elites to control resources for private benefit, a condition that closely mirrors the Nigerian experience.

A central explanation of politics as an economy in Nigeria is provided by Richard Joseph (1987) through his theory of prebendalism. Joseph conceptualizes prebendalism as elite appropriation of state resources. In similar light, he conceptualizes Nigerian politics as prebendal, where public office is treated as a source of personal income. That is, public offices in Nigeria are treated as prebends positions that generate income for officeholders and their networks. This system normalizes the expectation that political power must yield material benefits. Therefore, officeholders are expected to distribute resources to their networks, reinforcing the economic value of political power.

While prebendal has always in part of Nigerian politics during previous civil and military governments, contemporary studies suggest that prebendal politics remains deeply embedded in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Demarest (2020) argues that despite democratic consolidation since 1999, corruption and (political) patronage remain institutionalized within legislative politics. Prior to this time, Onyeonoru (2002) observed that the military led governments in Nigeria, led by different military ruling elites in past encouraged corruption through patronage in the 1960s, legitimized corruption and perpetuated patronage in the 1980s, and institutionalized corruption and patronage in the early 1990s, and that the organizations, including public offices were the machinery for implementing, assimilating and reproducing it.

Leading to the emergence of military government in 1966s, political corruption through political patronage networks was evidence among the political elites, thus contributed to led to the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966 which introduced the military elites to government and governance. The Military coup was against political corruption of civil government led by the political elites through the ruling political parties that form the government at the regional and federal levels at time, in the first republic. Also, during this civil rule before the first militarily coup, the oil-money through economic extractions through political, ethnic, religious and regional patronage, empowered and enabled government bureaucrats, military officers and phony businessmen who were more-or-less political businessmen to become multi-millions at the expense of the majority of Nigerians (Igbo, 1992). The civil rule of the second republic (1979-1983) perpetuated corrupt practices through similar patronage systems, and this became part of the international image of Nigeria and contributed to the rationale of the military elite's coup that overthrew the civil government (Onege, 1983).

The third republic engineered by the military and still controlled by the military and truncated by the military never attained political and democratic maturity because of truncation, in which the June 12 1992 winner of the presidential elections never assumed office, in what the ruling military elite claims was court of law proscription of the election. Therefore, the ruling military elite's corruption practices and patronage were still overwhelming at the time. This demonstrates the continuity of prebendal practices before and beyond military rule into contemporary democratic governance. However, this paper extends the argument by suggesting that prebendal logic has diffused downward, influencing how ordinary citizens engage politics. Youths and unemployed individuals now participate in politics and political networks as clients, mobilizers, or intermediaries in exchange for material benefits.

## Historical Roots of Politics as an Economy in Nigeria

The origins of politics as an economy in Nigeria can be traced to colonial rule, which established an extractive state focused on resource control rather than development. Acemoglu have similarly observed generically that in developing societies prior to independence, colonies with non-colonial setters were entrenched with extractive institutions of the state aimed at extraction of nature resources and exploitation of human resources. As result, in Nigerian context, colonial administrators centralized authority and created structures that prioritized revenue extraction (Tseayo, 1975). This reflects the broader argument of Mamdani (1996), who contends that colonial governance in Africa institutionalized decentralized despotism through indirect rule systems that entrenched authoritarian local power structures. Rodney (1972) had similarly argued that colonialism fundamentally distorted African economic systems by subordinating them to external extraction and dependency.

Beyond this, Wanger & Odok (2025) argued differently that while the modern institutions in developing societies reflect the imposition of colonial structures on these societies, the extractive or inclusive forms of the institutions were not determined by whether colonialist settled or did not settle as Acemoglu argued. Rather, that the goal of colonialism was extraction for a certain group, that is the colonialists abroad, whereas other groups that were natives were exploited, excluded, and marginalized. Wanger & Odok further argued that, whether an institution is extractive and inclusive is significantly a function of the dominant interest the institutions are designed to serve, especially the interests of dominant groups (ruling elites). In post-colonial independence, these structures were reinforced rather than dismantled by national political elites who assumed leadership of the post-colonial institutions and the Nigerian state (Otite, 2000, 1983. 1976, 1975; Albert, 2000). The emergence of national political elites gave them control over the institutions of the postcolonial state and over the concentrated wealth of the state, as they apply public office power and privileges, through elitistic privileges, ethnic politics and religious politics to extract the capital of the state for private capital accumulation and by extension political patronage network benefits along ethnic, religious, political party, regional, and clientele lines.

These observations did not exempt the precolonial agriculture societies of Nigeria of operating extractive institutions especially the political institution as the traditional rulers engaged in corrupt practices in administration and adjudication of land that was central to the economy (Onyeonoru, 2002; Otite, 1983; Odekunle, 1983). They were also not free of intra-tribal politics or inter-tribal politics and conflicts. These corrupt practices and tribal politics were also associated with the colonial and post-colonial state institutional weakness and this indicated the institutions were embedded with predatory and extractive acts of public officers, including the bureaucratic elite in the process of rendering public services. With their shared interests with political and economic elites, these weak institutional structures perpetuated the appropriation public resources by the political elite (and economic elite through the political elite), in which they treated the state as a tool and source for private gains rather for public good and development.

This suggest that modernization as an instrument to get rid of institutional predation such corrupt practices (for example, extortion and rent seeking) as well as social divisions associated with institutions of traditional societies in precolonial and colonial times was unsuccessful. Rather, the institutional predation was perpetuated in the modern state institutions that were established to govern over the traditional societies such as the colonial established naive authority structures that function along with modern institutions in colonial and postcolonial time. The collaboration between native authority officers/chiefs and the officers of the public institutions of the state and party-political elite who dominated the regional institutions sustained extraction of public resources for private gains, ethnic, religious and regional patronage. This was and is often enabled with party politics, where the ruling political parties used their control over state structures and resources to control traditional institutions and projected ideologies that benefits them.

Also, rather than weaken and neutralized tribal politics, colonial modernization through divide and rule and distribution of institutional power and privileges to other tribal groups over others, facilitated ethnicity, ethnic politics and religious politics, thus creating weak modern institutions that are also extractive instead strong modern institutions that are to be inclusive. The weak modern institutions became associated with corrupt practices such as patron-clientele exchange relationships for contract, appointment and opportunities along the lines of ethnic, religious and regional identities or political party identity. These were pervasive and widespread in public institutions (Odekunle, 1983) as public institutions became the competitive space for among political elites (such party-political elites, ethnic elites, religious elites and regional elites) for illegal extract of state wealth and political resources for personal gains as well as distribution of the same to communal groups of identities (Joseph, 1987 Nnoli, 2003, 1982, 1978).

For example, historically, the dominance of Action Congress (AC) in Western region, National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in Eastern region and Northern People's Congress (NPC) in Northern region and United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) in parts of Northern region in the 1950s and early 1960s and the AC, NCNC and NPC control over the traditional, regional and federal government structures in their respective regions of power and mass political fellowship to the advantages of their party members and to the disadvantage of opposition and minority political parties in the regional and federal government levels was evidence with patronage systems of corrupt practices such as political and economic manipulations, exploitation, domination, intimidation, repression, and exclusions- Such that similar access to such structures and resources of the three regional governments and the federal government were denial to members of other political parties with weak presence in the regions and at the federal level (Igbo, 1992; Onoge, 1982).

The consequences of fierce political competition between ruling political parties and opposition political parties in each regions and for access to federal power led to intermittent violent political conflicts in Western over internal control of political party structure and the direction of political party alliances, and in the Northern (the Tivland) region such violent political conflict was over political struggle to broaden the political space for political inclusion and autonomy of the Tiv ethnic minority. Overall, this political competition of political parties whether at the regional and federal levels were over access to and control of power and resources in the regions and of federal government, and these were accompanied with corrupt practices through patronage systems-These divisive political conflicts led to the first military coup of 1966 and subsequently the Nigerian civil war (Hembe,2000; Albert, 2000; Tseayo, 1975). The subsequent party politics between the late 1970s and the the early 1980s (involving National Party of Nigeria, NPN, United Party of Nigeria, UPN, Great Nigerian Peoples Party, GNPP, Peoples Redemption Party, PRP) in the second republic, in the late 1990s (Social Democratic Party, SDP and National Republican Convention, NRC) in the third republic and since 1999 to the 2000s (Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, All Nigerian Peoples Party, and later All Progressive Congress, APC, PDP, Labour Party, LP, New Nigeria Peoples Party, NNPP) in the fourth republic was led at those different times by different ruling political party such as the NPN (1970s-1980s), then SDP (1990s ), PDP (1999-2015) and much later and currently APC (2015-2026). Their style of party politics has not largely been different from the first republic party politics, as party political patronage systems continued along ethnic, religious, regional and regional lines.

The oil boom of the 1970s intensified the centralization of state wealth, making the state the primary distributor of economic resources. Prior to this, agriculture which was once the significant source of national economic revenues, wealth and employment for young people declined significantly, and the political elites (as ethnic and religious elites) shifted attention from agricultural generated national wealth to the oil-revenue generated national wealth. As a result, the intensified political competition, especially among political elites (including ethnic and religious elites) became increasingly tied to access to oil revenues and state-controlled wealth (Nnoli, 2002, 1982, 1978).

Instead of diversifying the economy with the incentives of the state oil-wealth as development investments, the persistent attempts of political elites, particularly ethnic elites and religious elites was to preserve control over state resources for personal gains, their ethnic and religious communities and regions through political parties, and this was also for the distribution of the national wealth and opportunities in the favor of their ethnic and religious communities and regions. Nigeria’s dependence on oil revenue also reflects characteristics of the rentier state longed described by Beblawi & Luciani (1987), where governments rely heavily on externally generated rents rather than domestic taxation. Even where domestic taxation as means of diversification of national revenue sources from oil-revenue is increasingly contributing to national wealth, as evident in Nigeria, the bureaucratic elite and the political elite collaborate to extract and self-appropriate this national wealth for personal gains and the of their families instead of the vast majority ordinary masses. With this kind systems and politics, political accountability weakens because the state becomes financially autonomous from citizens. Again, as typical of Nigeria, Terry Lynn Karl (1997) argues that oil wealth often produces a 'paradox of plenty,' where resource abundance contributes to corruption, institutional decay, and weak democratic accountability. This is sometime described as 'oil cause.' This perpetuates patronage systems thus encourages and sustains rent-seeking practices and at the same time marginalizing the resources that should be invested in social and human development.

The emergence of the global economic crisis in the late 1970s incapacitated the economy and stagnated development. Yet, for the survival of the ruling political elites, they engaged in illegal private accumulation of oil-wealth-This created severe economic crisis for the masses across different individuals, groups and production organizations in Nigeria- This further evolved into exploitation of privileged relationship of public employees with key public sector managers for personal or organization advantages (Onyeonoru, 2002) as well as the use of contrived security threat to obtain approval for extra budgetary allocation for personal enrichment of public officers (Olopoenia, 1998). Also, public projects were deliberately designed to ensure private accumulation of capital by high public officers as the execution of such project were ridden with misappropriation of public funds without accountability.

What development investments were made from the high oil-wind fall national revenues during different military regimes in the 1980s and the 1990s remains a questionable mystery. Yet, as much elaborated by Onyeonoru, these periods marked public normlessness with the disposition of employees into organization deviance, political legitimacy seeking induced settlements, persons who self-appropriated public funds rewarded with chieftaincy titles, membership of high status and honorary doctorate degrees; motivation, achievement and ingenuity relegated for favoritism; justice became uncertain under a compromised Nigerian Judicial system, were those who engage in willful corrupt practices and crimes were protected from justice of the court of law and become more powerful-All of these culminated to governance crisis which was further worsened by economic austerity measures of structural adjustment policies as evident with pitiable abject poverty and hunger, financial crisis, industrialization crisis, unemployment crisis, deplorable national security crisis and broader development crisis (Onyeonoru, 2002). Every period of economic crisis in Nigeria usually impacts negative on the population of youths in which their small available opportunities further declining, thus expose them to vulnerable politics or risky politics of working against good governance politics in favor of stomach infrastructure politics.

Since the 1990s, as result of the skewed regional development perceived as arising from political marginalization, resource control struggles between the ruling military elite and the local elites in the region of the Niger-Delta states of Nigeria resuscitated ethnic and regional politics and divide and rule politics. Consequently, this led to youth militant activism in these regional states to challenge the state authority over marginal receipt of national oil-revenue distributed-allocation and development impasse in the region even when their region has been the major source of wealth of the Nigerian state. The local elite including the chiefs that benefited from their patronage relations with the ruling elite were perceived as sell out and were labeled as illegal representative of the people. Under the civil rule since 1999, through party politics, elected public offices and youth militancy, the authority of the Nigerian state continued to be challenged with demands for national resource distribution to be based derive principle.

The marginal success of the demands was the new Nigeria constitution amended provision of 13 percent oil-derivative revenue allocations to oil-producing states in the region, with which many of the local elite emerged as heavy weight political players, as they were empowered by control of oil-revenue resources at the state and federal levels, to engage in massive political events such campaigns and rallies, financing political youth groups, vote buying, masterminding and encouraging ballot snatching and broader election rigging, displacement of opposition political parties from the political space, and election wins through loyal security groups comprising of militant youth groups and instrumentality of force such as army and police. This political trend continues to be common across Nigeria with political elite access to state power and wealth.

These prebendal acts has persisted as a cultural oriented value of both public officers and political elites since the late 1950s up to the 2000s. Since postcolonial independent Nigeria in 1960 to the 2000s, successive governments both civil and military governments depend on political patronage by means of ethnic politics and religious politics to acquire, access, utilize and distribute the accumulated national wealth derived from crude oil-capital, and they often blended ethnic and religious politics to sustain their political legitimacy. The intensification of political competition for power and wealth along party, ethnic, religious and regional lines and claims to turn to rotational state power divert focus from broader development policies and investments in young people and for the common good to the settlement of political clientele, including youths for their political services and loyalty. This undermines institutions and weaken governance, which in turn disincentivized economic performance, and impair development prospers.

The lines of political divisions and party politics serves as lines of perpetuation of patronage network of distributing material and financial assistance and opportunities to their political party loyalists and political foot soldiers mostly the youths, with the economic elite underground funding, influencing and fostering beneficial exchange relations with the political elites. They weight of the political patronage continued since 1999 to 2015 under ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and has been much heavier since May 2015 under the ruling APC in which ethnic, regional, religious and political nepotism in political appointments and contracts and public institutional control were prevalent and in favored of Hausa and Fulani Muslims in the North-East and North-Western regions of Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. And between 2023 to date, under the ruling APC, ethnic and religious politics and political nepotism in terms of appointments, contracts and public institutional control were prevalent and favored more of the Yoruba in the South-West region of Nigeria. This tends to indicate a turn-by-turn ethnic political nepotism for political appointments, contracts and other opportunities by the majority populated ethnic groups to the exclusion of one major ethnic group the Igbo and minority ethnic groups who have to depend on their political patronage relations with the ruling parties led by other majority ethnic groups for access to Nigerian state wealth and political resources such as appointments and economic opportunities.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on a hybrid political economy framework combining prebendalism Theory, Political Marketplace Theory, Rent-Seeking Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and institutional theory. These theories collectively explain how politics in Nigeria functions as both a system of elite accumulation and a survival strategy for ordinary citizens, particularly youths.

The central framework is Richard Joseph's (1987) theory of prebendalism, which explains how public offices in Nigeria are treated as prebends for personal accumulation and distribution to political clients, ethnic groups, and loyal supporters. The theory is relevant in explaining patronage politics, godfatherism, elite capture, and the monetization of political participation.

The study also draws on de Waal's (2015) Political Marketplace Theory, which conceptualizes politics as a transactional arena where political loyalty, electoral support, and institutional access are exchanged through financial bargaining and patronage networks. This framework helps explain vote-buying, political financing, and patron-client relations in Nigeria.

Rent-Seeking Theory, associated with Krueger (1974) and Khan (2000), further explains how political actors use state institutions and public resources for private accumulation through practices such as contract inflation, political patronage, and resource diversion.

In addition, Rational Choice Theory explains why many youths and marginalized groups participate in monetized politics as rational survival strategies in response to unemployment, poverty, and exclusion. Political participation therefore becomes both an economic and political strategy.

Institutional theory, particularly the work of Douglass North, explains how weak formal institutions, ineffective governance structures, poor rule enforcement, and dominant informal norms enable prebendal and transactional politics to persist. The theory emphasizes that political behavior is shaped not only by formal constitutional arrangements but also by informal institutions such as godfatherism, ethnic loyalty, corruption networks, and patronage systems. The hybridization of these theories therefore allows the study to analyze: how political office becomes a means of economic accumulation (Prebendalism); how political relations are commercialized and transactional (Political Marketplace Theory); how strong groups like politicians use institutions and public resources for accumulation (Rent-Seeking Theory); how participation in monetized politics serve as rational survival strategies (Rational Choice Theory), and why these practices remain deeply entrenched within the Nigerian state structure (Institutional Theory). Together, the framework provides a multidimensional explanation of politics as an economy in Nigeria by linking elite behavior, informal political transactions, institutional weaknesses, and survival strategies among economically marginalized populations. Broadly, they explain politics as an economy in Nigeria, where political power serves as a mechanism for wealth accumulation, patronage distribution, and survival.

**Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative political economy research design using historical-analytical and descriptive approaches. The qualitative method is appropriate because the study critically examines patronage politics, elite capture, vote-buying, prebendalism, youth political participation, and the informal political economy in Nigeria. Although the study focuses mainly on Nigeria's Fourth Republic, particularly the 2023 general elections, it also provides historical insights into politics as an economy from the First, Second, and Third Republics. Thus, the study is primarily explanatory and interpretive rather than statistical.

The study relies mainly on secondary data obtained from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspaper reports, government publications, election reports, policy documents, institutional publications, and online databases. Key sources include reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), International Labour Organization (ILO), European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), Channels Television, BusinessDay, Punch Newspaper, and Premium Times.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring themes such as *politics as an economy, patronage, patron-client relations, vote-buying, youth survival strategies, elite capture, political monetization, digital political activism, prebendalism, political marketplace dynamics, democratic erosion, and institutional weakness*. Content analysis enabled the systematic interpretation of texts, media reports, policy documents, institutional publications, and scholarly literature relating to politics and political economy in Nigeria and Africa. These methods helped identify recurring patterns relating to *rent-seeking, patronage politics, vote-buying, and elite dominatio*n. The qualitative analytical approach is suitable because the study is explanatory, interpretive, and non-quantitative in nature.

**The Two Publics, Moral Economy and Social Legitimacy in Nigeria**

Ekeh (1975, 1983) offers further insight through his ‘two publics’ thesis, which distinguishes between the civic public (associated with the state) and the primordial public (linked to ethnic and communal identities). In his two public thesis, Ekeh explains how individuals exploit the civic public for the benefit of their communities. To state differently, Ekeh explained how individuals justify exploiting state resources (civic public) to benefit their communities (primordial public). In other words, precolonial social structure has continued to prevail against western-post-colonial social structure of the civil public thus distorting modern development designs and paths. Consequently, Ekeh argues that moral obligations are stronger in the primordial public, leading individuals to exploit the civic public (where they attach less or no moral obligation) for the benefit of their communities. This dynamic reinforces the use of political office as an economic resource.

This framework helps explain why political patronage is socially tolerated, particularly among economically disadvantaged groups. For many unemployed youths, political participation often through patronage networks is morally justified as a means of survival and communal support. Related to this is the political acts of patrimonialism and neo-patrimonialism. The concept of patrimonial rule (or patrimonialism) is associated with Max Weber (1978), and its modern variant, neo-patrimonialism, further explain the personalization of state power. In such systems, formal institutions coexist with informal networks of loyalty and patronage, making political authority a key determinant of economic access.

In the wider Africa' context, similar political acts prevail, in which the neo-patrimonial character of African states has also been extensively examined by Clapham (1982) and van de Walle (2001), who argue that formal bureaucratic structures in many African countries coexist with informal patronage systems that personalize political authority. In Nigeria, to reiterate, these informal structures often supersede formal institutional rules, thereby transforming political office into a mechanism for patronage distribution and economic accumulation.

**Youth Unemployment and the Turn to Politics as an Economy**

Nigeria faces persistently high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment. Nigeria's demographic structure is youth-heavy, with millions entering the labour market annually. Yet, the economy continuously struggles to absorb them. Approximately 1.7 million graduates enter the labour force each year without sufficient job opportunities (Premium Times, 2025; Africa Check, 2025). While official youth unemployment rates range between 6.5% and 8.4% ((Premium Times, 2025; Africa Check, 2025) depending on measurement methods, the broader realities of underemployment and informal work paint a more severe picture of economic crisis. Despite constituting the demographic majority, Nigerian youths remain structurally underrepresented in political institutions. Recent studies argue that entrenched elite networks, high campaign costs, and patronage systems limit youth access to political office (Abati & Adeniji, 2026). Consequently, many young Nigerians engage in politics informally through mobilization, brokerage, online activism, and electoral patronage rather than through formal representation.

In the absence of sufficient formal employment opportunities, many young people turn to politics as an economic strategy to explore and utilize their ideas, innovation, capabilities. This translates to the expansion of politics as a survival economy. Recent empirical studies on youth unemployment in Nigeria further demonstrate that weak institutional coordination, poor governance, and political exclusion significantly undermine employment-generation programmes (Omoju et al., 2023). As formal economic opportunities continue to shrink, political networks increasingly function as informal welfare and employment systems for many young people. This manifests in several ways: the youths as other marginalized groups are recruited and engaged in political mobilization, campaign works, logistics, and media by political elites, and for the political elites to achieve their political objectives, these youths are recruited as campaign agents, party agents, political protesters and counter-political protesters, rally organizers, and grassroots mobilizers, often receiving financial compensation.

These youth and other marginalized groups also serve as electoral brokerage, in which individuals from these categories of people act as intermediaries between politicians and voters, facilitating vote-buying, vote-selling or turnout mobilization. Broadly, the engage in brokerage roles between politicians and communities. Often, they are also engaged by institutions of the state such as national electoral commission to serve as election polling officers and election presiding officers, where regularly the political elites of the different political parties, particularly those of the ruling party co-opt or recruit their loyal youth followers into the commission's institutional role of organizing and conducting election in order to serve as surveillance and manipulate the election process and determine votes in their favor, for their electoral victory in exchange for illicit financial compensation.

Further, many of the youth and marginalized groups are recruited and engaged in political thuggery and security roles, which often including engaging of youth armed militia or economic-political gangs for political and security protection. Through these roles, in some cases, the unemployed youths are engaged in coercive activities during elections in exchange for payments. Their participation in politics gives them access to patronage benefits such that their participation in political networks provides opportunities for jobs, contracts, financial assistance and political appointments. To reiterate, in specific terms, politics as employment economy shows that politics provide many youths with campaign jobs (mobilization, logistics, media, informal security roles during elections, brokerage roles) between politicians and communities, for which they gain access to stipends, contracts, and appointments.

In the digital age, the expansion of digital technologies and social media has also transformed political mobilization in Nigeria. Ajibola (2021) argues that social media platforms increasingly serve as spaces for political bargaining, mobilization, resistance, and youth-driven democratic engagement. This digital political culture became particularly visible during the #EndSARS protests and the 2023 elections (for example the Obedient Movement linked to candidate of the Labour Party, LP). Heading into the 2027 general election is the emergence of the 'City Boy Movement' associated with the campaign for the re-election of ruling political party, the APC- At the state and local government levels there are also different but similar youth groups aligned with and supporting different incumbent governors and other party candidates seeking (re)elections.

The digital platforms and social media which also serves as online fora of political mobilization and engagement or political activism further serves as digital spaces were youths loyal to certain political elites such as godfathers across different party lines engage in broad political opposition to the ruling political party with their political elite whereas some youths serve as advocate for the ruling political party in power. These youths especially those recruited for such online services are compensated sometime for their online loyal services. While these youths have become commoners and laborers to the far away techo-feudalist through digital monetization and digital rents collection of of the latter, the youth-led online and digital political campaigns, mobilizations and engagements on online digital platforms (such YouTube, Tik Tok, X (Twitter, facebook), attracts and draws political engagers to the platforms. And by every of their clicks, scrolls, and activities of any users, the techno-feudalists are enriched through collection of digital rents. Yet, the platforms have become an online political marketplace where the youth through digital political campaigns, paid digital activism or oppositions'/supporters' campaigns, advocacy, and public relations for different stakeholders including political elites project their visibility and that of their clients, they also obtain beneficial financial rewards from the economic rents, with income rewards from both the techno-feudalists and paid clients.

Largely, from a rational choice perspective, these activities represent strategic responses to economic exclusion, new economic and financial rewarding opportunities, and means to navigate into spheres of political and economic inclusion. Politics, therefore, becomes not only a site of elite accumulation but also a survival economy for youths (especially unemployed youths) and marginalized populations. This survivalist dimension of politics resonates with the work of Honwana (2012), who describes how African youths navigate conditions of economic uncertainty through informal and politically mediated survival strategies. In similar tone, Bayat (2010) argues that marginalized populations often engage in 'quiet encroachment' through informal practices aimed at economic survival within exclusionary systems.

These activities transform politics into a parallel labour market, particularly during election cycles. Common knowledge-based observations prior to and during political activities periods including election period, as empirical evidence, indicate that elections serve as an economic market where the phenomenon of vote-buying and vote-selling are means of informal (underground) economic exchanges across Nigeria. These are usually through exchange of individuals' and groups' support and votes for money or material terms and other beneficial opportunities. Recent Nigerian elections demonstrate how politics functions as a transactional economy. In the 2023 general elections, about 22% of voters reported being offered money for their votes (NBS, 2024; Punch Newspaper 2024; Business Day Report, 2024; Channels Television Report, 2024; TVC News, 2024). Specifically, the 2025 Anambra elections revealed vote-buying payments ranging from ₦3,000, ₦20,000 to ₦30,000 (The Guardian, 2025; Legit.ng, 2025)). Similarly, in 2023 Economic and Financial Crime Commission's (EFCC) intelligence as revealed by its Chairman Abdulrasheed Bawa, was that politicians were planning vote buying using food items and gifts during the 2023 elections (Channels Television Report, 2023). These exchange phenomena reflect a structured 'political marketplace' driven by both poverty, personal economic crisis and strategic political calculation.

The concept of the political marketplace is extensively developed by de Waal (2015), who conceptualizes politics in fragile states as a transactional arena in which loyalty, coercion, and political support are commodified. In this framework, political actors operate like entrepreneurs competing within a marketplace regulated by patronage and financial bargaining rather than democratic norms. In similar tone, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes African politics as a transactional marketplace in which political support, loyalty, violence, and institutional access are monetized. The evolving new phenomenon particularly in Nigeria which is form of manifestation prebendal acts is that political appointments are monetized, as those to be given appointment are required to pay for such appointments in millions of naira or thousands of dollars. de Waal (2015) have also argued that in many African states politics functions as a 'political marketplace' where political allegiances are bought and sustained through financial bargaining and patronage distribution. In the Nigerian context, recent studies demonstrate that political financing, elite bargaining, and patronage networks continue to shape electoral competition and governance outcomes (Miller, 2024; Ariyo & Akomolafe, 2025).

Importantly also, these monetary figures deployed in election engagement as reported here illustrate how politicians treat elections and politics as investments and also how citizens including the youths and other marginalized and vulnerable groups treat voting as an income opportunity. The latter categories of citizens also treat politics and election as either immediate or long term and prospective life changing opportunities in terms of material gains or employment. In another perspective, politics is the context of informal political economy and youth participation, in which it serves to provide high levels of informal employment that is estimated at over 90% of total employment (Omoju et al., 2023; International Labour Organization, 2024, 2014; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024). This mean that many Nigerians operate outside formal economic structures. Politics also provide other opportunities such as opportunity for rural-urban migration, exposing the rural youths and marginalized groups to urban life thus reinforcing their recognition of the significance of politics to providing them with the life chances for a better life. In such context, political engagements become a rational economic strategy.

**Mechanisms of Politics as a Mass and Elite Economy**

The mechanisms of politics as an economy include mainly state control of wealth, rent-seeking and elite capture, patronage and clientelism, and monetization of politics. As Bratton & van de Walle (1997) argue, patronage systems in Africa function as informal welfare mechanisms. This includes short-term financial relief, employment opportunities and social protection. For these reasons, Bratton & van de Walle argued that African political systems often rely on patronage networks to maintain political stability. In the context of Nigeria, the Nigerian state controls significant economic resources, particularly through oil revenues. The acquisition of state power means significant control over state economic resources.

As Terry Lynn Karl (1997) notes in her analysis of oil-dependent states, resource wealth often strengthens state power while weakening accountability, creating opportunities for patronage, including rent-seeking. For this reason, patron-clientele relationships are central to Nigerian politics. Through such relationship, the networks distribute economic benefits in exchange for political loyalty. Therefore, in Nigeria, political patronage provides income streams for unemployed youths and other marginalized groups including women, reinforcing their dependence on political actors as well as increases the political significance of the political actors, some of who are regarded as godfathers. This is particularly so in the political strata of roles and network contact of political elites (such as local level elite, state level elite and national level elite), where at each of the levels of political strata, there is political patronage network transactions that include exchanges between the political godfathers and political godsons and with other political loyalists and clients.

This is persistent political phenomenon, which recent Nigerian scholarship has also emphasized, and the persistence of godfatherism prevails as a mechanism of elite control and patronage distribution. Abdullahi (2026) have argued in this regard that godfatherism reinforces political dependency, clientelism, and weak democratic competition in Nigeria. Also, Jombo (2025) observed that patronage politics and executive-legislative conflicts weaken institutional effectiveness and deepen elite domination within Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Interestingly, executive-legislative co-operations driven largely by elites' shared interest rather than public interest also weaken institutional effectiveness, as the institutions have become tools of extractions and rent seeking from the national wealth through political and institutional manipulations. The executive-legislative cooperative decisions on particularly national credit borrowing, high expending on debt payments is perceived as reducing national finances thus thwarting development investments.

In the highly politicized context of Nigeria, politics especially ethnic politics, regional politics and religious politics do not serve only as means of mass mobilization especially of the youth required by political elite, but these are also critical means and opportunity for personal gains as well as group advancement. Importantly, such political context, as Kasfir (1976) observed, failures and successes is interpreted in ethnic terms, and ethnicity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, inspiring competing organizations and scapegoating. Such failure or successes kind also be interpreted in religious terms or regional terms. By extension, youths perceive their failures and successes in patron-clientele term, and patronage becomes seeing as self-fulfillment prophecy to access a share of the national wealth and a better life. And ethnic, regional and religious politics or elite politics stands as enablers or constraints to the value of patron-clientele to successes or failures to improve material opportunities and assets. The gives, legitimatizes and reinforces the political significance of the political elites as the youths developed a strong sense of their life chances, successes and failures as dependent on the (privileged or opportunistic) political elites including the opportunistic and privileged ruling political elites.

The youths as part of the masses are mobilized along ethnic lines, religious lines, kin and lineage and then political party to sustain the patronage systems. In this context, political patronage serves as livelihood system as well as communal survival system. For this reason, political predatory and rent-seeking behavior is pervasive in Nigeria's political system. Krueger (1974) define, rent-seeking as the efforts to economic gain without contributing to productivity. The persistence of elite capture in Nigeria also reflects what Khan (2000) describes as politically mediated accumulation, where access to political power determines access to economic opportunities. Bates (1981) had similarly argued that state interventions in African economies frequently become instruments for redistributing resources to politically connected groups rather than promoting productive development. In Nigeria, political elites engage in practices such as contract inflation and fund diversion, reinforcing the economic value of political office. Like ethnicity, political elite's prebendal interest reverses national priorities and promote their interests which threaten collective existence and attainment of national goals.

In this political context, while elites capture the largest share of state resources, portions of these resources are redistributed downward through patronage networks. This creates a trickle-down political economy, where benefits are uneven but socially significant. This establishes a context in which rent distribution goes beyond elites. This reinforces a pattern of rent seeking behaviour of youths, marginalized groups, political elite, ethnic elite, religious elite as well as institutional elite including bureaucratic elite.

This translates to monetization of political participation. In the same context, particularly in Nigeria, where elections are highly monetized, the elections are not only investments for elites but also income-generating events for ordinary citizens. The political actors invest substantial resources in political campaigns, viewing them as investments with expected returns. Again, this aligns with rational choice perspectives, where actors pursue strategies that maximize personal gain. Payments for attending rallies, voting, or mobilizing others transform democratic processes into economic transactions. Generally, politics provide the opportunity for rent-seeking and resource capture.

This rent-seeking is for gaining wealth and control resources without productive activity. In Nigeria, this includes contract inflation, budget diversion or budget paddling through government ministries, agencies and departments, institutional abuses such as sleaze, and regulatory manipulation to accumulate capital and control institutions for continues patronage and rent seeking. Electoral monetization is one of the many examples of such institutional abuses. Elections are increasingly monetized, with both elites (including institutional elite as members of national election commission) and citizens participating in financial exchanges. This reinforces the perception of politics as a marketplace rather than a civic process, requiring both civic responsibility and institutional responsibility.

**Implications for Governance, Development, and Society**

The transformation mechanism of politics from governance into competing market and patronage economy create an exclusionary and political dependency. For example, this kind of politics entrenches dependency. With this, the reliance of youths on political patronage for survival entrenches dependency and discourages long-term economic productivity. With these, the safe and motivational space to induce their innovation and innovation growth, ideas and abilities is limited and this makes them far less functional to the real economy, except used as disruptive and destructive instrument. This indicate that when politics becomes the primary avenue for wealth, productive sectors are neglected. As Ake (1981) notes, such systems undermine autonomous economic development. In other words, when politics becomes the dominant economic avenue, productive sectors decline. Again, as Ake notes, this leads to a disarticulated economy dependent on state resources. This distorts the economy.

By this disarticulated economy, growth is not driven by production but by access to state resources. This is an indication of weak institutions. Weak institutions fail to regulate political behavior effectively. As North (1990) argued, weak institutional frameworks. Fukuyama (2014) argues that political decay emerges when institutions fail to adapt and become captured by private interests. Huntington (1968) earlier noted that rapid political mobilization without corresponding institutional development often produces instability, corruption, and weakened governance structures in developing societies.

On a general note, scholars (North,1990; Olson,1993; Williamson, 1985; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) argued that weak institutions indicate weak governance, thus weak rule of law, political exclusion, discourages and lower economy activities including investments and innovation as well as weaken transparency and accountability. This gives opportunity for corruption practices such as sleaze, nepotism, patron-clientelism and elite control for personal or group gains, not for the entire society. This indicates the economic and political exclusion of people of society especially young people. All of these generate development crisis.

Whereas strong institutions (sometime requiring strong men in some contexts) reduces transaction cost, promote and entrenches structure incentives, promote, encourage and guarantee long-term investments as well as grow innovation and entrepreneurship through policy consistency and rule of law. This fosters and entrenches both economic and political inclusion of young people. Overall, this indicate that good governance contributes significantly to fostering development. However, weak institutions create incentives for opportunistic behavior, weaken governance (as the institutional functions to the will of the elites especially state institutional actors such the president) and undermining long-term development. Therefore, weak state institutions provide the opportunities for prebendal and to sustain the prebendalism, the political elite's collaboration with institutional elite such as bureaucratic elites. The fusion of politics and economics fuels corruption and deepens inequality. Access to wealth becomes dependent on political connections, excluding large segments of the population.

Also, it creates a normalization of informal political economy such that when politics becomes a livelihood strategy, practices such as vote-buying, vote-selling, and patronage become normalized rather than contested and prosecuted. Reliance on political patronage discourages entrepreneurship and long-term skill development among youths. This accounts for youth dependency and lost productivity. The immediate and long-term consequences of this is the distortion of democratic participation, as vote-buying, vote-selling, and monetized participation questions and weaken democratic accountability and legitimacy. This manifest when political participation is driven by immediate economic needs rather than civic ideals, weakening democratic accountability and governance. This accounts for democratic erosion or crisis of democratic development among youths and in the whole of Nigeria.

The monetization of politics also undermines democratic consolidation by weakening civic trust and electoral legitimacy. Diamond (2008) argues that corruption and patronage networks weaken democratic institutions across Africa by subordinating accountability to clientelistic exchanges. Sandbrook (1985) had earlier observed that patron-client systems often displace programmatic politics and institutional accountability. Recent youth-led movements in Nigeria depict a growing political consciousness among young citizens dissatisfied with corruption, unemployment, police brutality, patronage systems, elite domination and highly monetized politics. Studies on the aftermath of the #EndSARS protests reveal that these experiences contributed significantly to increased youth voter mobilization and demands for institutional and political accountability during the 2023 elections (Omotayo, 2023). This reinforces the observation that youth are not passive beneficiaries of patronage systems but increasingly becoming active political actors. Notwithstanding many of the youths' activism for political transformation and rule of law, those illicit acts have subsisted, as mass of youths are fragmented along party political, ethnic and religious and regional lines for their individual interests and gains rather than constitute a youth block to champion a broad political agenda that start to transform the Nigerian state into developmental state.

When political competition is driven by economic interests, democracy weaken. Associated with this is that amoral and undemocratic practices such vote-buying, vote-selling, electoral violence, and reduced accountability that has become prevalent, thus, undermining democratic consolidation. Also, this establishes the reproduction of inequality such that, while some youths benefit from political engagement, access remains uneven and mediated by connections, reinforcing structural inequality. Therefore, access to political networks determines economic opportunities, undermine meritocracy and reinforces inequality and exclusion. In contemporary Nigeria, politics as an economy is reinforced by high cost of elections, high cost of nomination forms for elective political positions, weak enforcement of anti-corruption laws, and the expansion of informal political financing.

However, civil society organizations and digital activism are increasingly challenging these practices by promoting transparency and accountability. Though this appear to be largely unsuccessful as elite continuously innovate ways of manipulating and undermining institutions thus sustaining their political predation and rent seeking. This empower and enable them to remain in control of state power and wealth and to remain politically significant. Indications from recent analyses of Nigerian democracy suggest that elite patronage systems continue to overshadow issue-based democratic competition. Contemporary electoral politics remains heavily dependent on political financing, elite coalitions, ethnic mobilization, and patron-client networks (Isaac & Odugbose, 2026; Nwachukwu, 2026, Adetula, 2024). Although youth-led political movements are increasingly visible, entrenched elite structures still dominate state institutions and electoral machinery.

**Towards a Reframed Understanding of Politics as an Economy**

This paper argues that politics as an economy in Nigeria should be understood as a dual system, which involve elite accumulation system (control of large-scale resources) and mass survival system (distribution of limited benefits to citizens). From elite political economy perspective, politics as economy include large scale resource control and institutional capture, and from the mass survival economy perspective, politics as economy involve youth participation in political activities and informal income through elections and other politica/electoral activities, and most significantly, foster and gain from patronage, particularly their clientele relationship with the political elite in power or associated with state powers and opportunities. Interestingly, both systems are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Elites rely on mass participation to sustain power, while citizens rely on elites for economic opportunities. In this context, politics is re-framed as a dual economy. To reiterate, these dual economy systems of politics are mutually reinforcing, as elites require mass participation while citizens depend on elite distribution of resources and opportunities.

Addressing this phenomenon requires a multidimensional approach. In specific terms, reforming the politics as an economy requires structural reforms in Nigeria. This includes job creation and economic diversification beyond state dependence-This will reduce reliance on political patronage by expanding formal employment opportunities. While mass unemployment of youths and marginalized groups increases the economic appeal of politics, sustainable increases in employment will decrease and weaken such appeal. Therefore, reducing youth unemployment is critical to weakening the economic appeal of politics, expanding the economy into productive sectors will shift the political cultural value to the practice of politics as community or people-oriented services, not financial gains for high social life style.

Institutional strengthening through institutional reforms enhances transparency and accountability in resource allocation. This ensures rule of law and control over elite's predatory excesses for capital accumulation thus fostering a safe investments environment and social development. The strengthening of accountability mechanisms can eliminate or at least limit rent-seeking practices, and the institutional actors becomes responsible to the masses, for the common good of every segment of ethnic societies and the nation. This is a mean to multi-culturalism and national integration.

Consequently, initiating and carrying out electoral reform including reforming electoral financing will eliminate or at least largely limit the monetization of political participation. Therefore, reducing vote-buying, vote-selling, and campaign monetization is essential for democratic integrity. These reforms promote civic values and political accountability.

Importantly, youth empowerment programmes through providing sustainable alternatives to politically mediated livelihoods is central to governance and development. Expanding opportunities outside the state reduces dependence on political patronage. As Acemoglu & Robinson emphasize, inclusive institutions are essential for breaking cycles of extractive governance. At the same time, inclusive institutions are essential for sustainable development. Inclusive governance promotes and foster inclusive institutions and their collective function shapes development.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Politics as an economy in Nigeria is not solely an elite-driven phenomenon but a deeply entrenched and broad-based socio-economic system that encompasses both elite wealth accumulation and mass survival strategies. In other words, the paper showed that weak institutions, unemployment, economic exclusion, monetized elections, and patron-client networks have transformed politics into a dual economy: an elite accumulation system and a mass survival economy. Although political participation provides short-term economic opportunities for some citizens, it reinforces patronage, rent-seeking, inequality, electoral monetization, and weak democratic accountability. For many youths and unemployed individuals, political engagement represents a rational response to economic marginalization and a means of improving life chances.

However, while this system provides short-term economic relief, it undermines long-term development, institutional integrity, political stability, and democratic governance and consolidation. As intervention, sustainable transformation requires addressing both the structural drivers of unemployment and the institutional incentives that make politics an economic enterprise. Therefore, the paper concludes that transforming politics from an economic enterprise into a public-service institution requires institutional reforms and strengthening, economic restructuring aimed at diversification, productive employment accompanied with relevant knowledge and skills upgrading, sustain electoral finance reforms define by laws and clear punitive sanctions and enforcement for violation, and sustainable youth empowerment through support-incentives and investments in their ideas, innovation and capabilities. In other words, sustainable change requires not only institutional reforms but also a transformation of the economic structure that currently makes politics one of the most viable sources of livelihood.

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